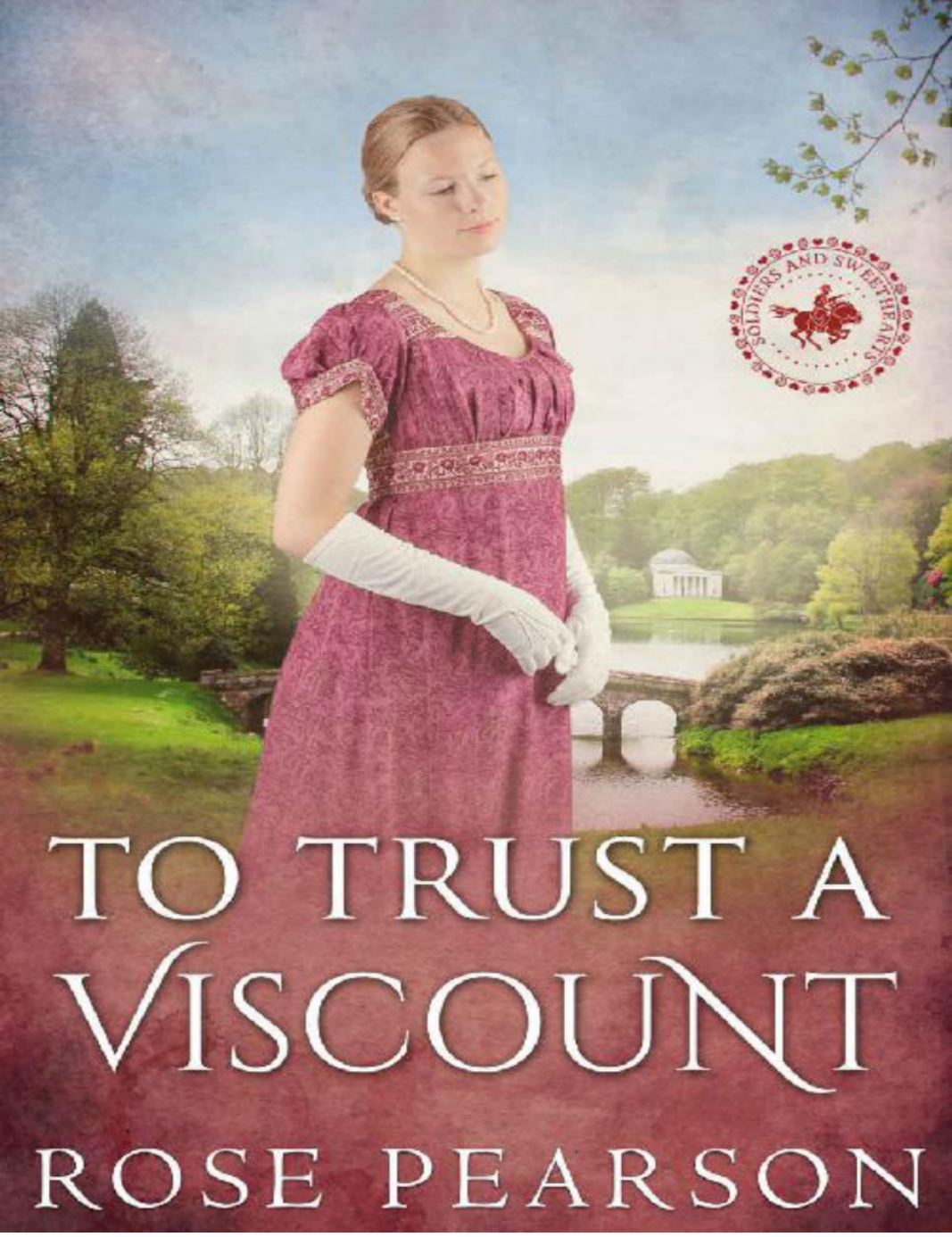

SOLDIERS AND SWEETHEARTS
TO TRUST A VISCOUNT
ROSE PEARSON

To Trust a Viscount

Soldiers and Sweethearts (Book 1)

Rose Pearson

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Soldiers and Sweethearts

(Book 1)

By

Rose Pearson

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To Trust a Viscount

Chapter One

"You must return to England."

"No." Daniel shook his head hard and immediately winced at the pain that shot through his shoulder and down his arm. Grimacing, he tried to ignore the fire that seemed to burn into his very bones. "I can still be of assistance here."

"You cannot." The Marquess of Stratham put one hand on Daniel's shoulder – his good shoulder – and looked steadily into his eyes. "You need to return home."

It went against every instinct that Daniel had. The war was here. The fighting was here. The defense of his country was here. Yes, he had been injured but surely that did not mean he simply had to turn tail and go home? Desperately, he looked back at his friend and prayed silently that the Marquess would see the extent of his determination and offer him another alternative, but as the minutes ticked by slowly, Daniel began to realize that it was not to be.

"I am sorry."

Dropping his head, Daniel let out a long sigh but did not allow any further protestations to pass his lips. The decision had been made, it seemed, and he could no longer fight against Napoleon's forces. Had he not been forced from his horse, had he not fallen so very badly, then he might now be back in his position and doing all he could to prevent the French from proceeding. Instead, it seemed, he was to return to England and to know nothing more about what was being done here. Whilst Daniel was grateful for his life of comfort, it did not seem so much of a comfort any longer. To return to his estate and to that particular way of life did not hold any sort of delight for him. Instead, he felt himself burdened. His heart was heavy with grief, anger, and frustration.

Someone stepped inside, handing the Marquess a note, which he took at once. Daniel did not look up, keeping his head bowed and forcing himself to breathe at a steady pace so that he would not give in to the despair that continued to snap at his heels.

"My goodness…."

In an instant, Daniel's head shot up and he looked eagerly back at his friend. His heart was pounding quickly, his good hand curling into

a tight fist as he saw the Marquess look from the letter to Daniel and back to the letter again.

"Well," the Marquess said, his chin lifting just a little and a brightness coming into his eyes. "I was very sorry to have to send you home to recover, but it seems now that fate is calling you back to England." Leaning forward, he handed Daniel the note. "You are now the Viscount Harrogate."

All of the air seemed to be pulled from around Daniel as he held the note in his hand and read it carefully. He could hardly believe what he was seeing, for the few short lines informed him that his uncle had, unfortunately, passed away and that he was now the new bearer of the title of Viscount. His uncle was not someone that Daniel had ever been particularly well acquainted with and, whilst he had known that he would inherit the title should anything happen to his uncle before his uncle produced an heir, Daniel had never considered it a near possibility. His uncle had not been anywhere near his dotage and, having only recently married, Daniel had expected an heir to be produced in the next few years.

"How – how did he die?" he muttered to himself, still trying to take in this news. "And there is no heir?"

"It seems there is not," the Marquess replied, one shoulder lifting as though to say that this was not a matter of any great importance. "Well, well! A Viscount!" He chuckled, then leaned forward and looked steadily at Daniel. "How would you feel about making your way to London, Viscount Harrogate?"

It was as though a great and heavy fog now pushed itself forward, flowing over Daniel and making him struggle to see or hear the Marquess clearly.

"To London?" he repeated, a little unsteadily. "For what purpose?"

The Marquess chuckled.

"For the Season!" he exclaimed, as though that was all that Daniel ought to be thinking about. "You must go to London for the Season and find yourself a pretty young lady to be your wife, given that you will now have to make certain to produce an heir!"

Daniel swallowed hard, feeling dust in his throat as he tried to make sense of what the Marquess was saying.

"The Duke of Abernyte will be there," the Marquess continued, the smile dropping from his face as he leaned forward in his chair, fixing Daniel with a serious look. "There is a message that I must relay to him."

"And you wish me to do it?" Daniel asked, still a little overwhelmed. "All because I am now a Viscount?" A sense of unfairness began to wash over him. "I could not have done it when I was an untitled gentleman, only a few minutes ago?"

Again, the Marquess shrugged.

"I must take my opportunities where they present themselves," he replied, calmly. "As an untitled gentleman, you would not be in the same social circle as the Duke and might arouse suspicion should you attempt to gain his company. However, as a Viscount, there will be nothing at all to concern anyone."

He sat back in his chair and smiled, leaving Daniel to blink rapidly as he fought to put everything the Marquess had said into clear, coherent order.

"You wish me to attend the London Season, to find the Duke, and to relay a message to him," he said, speaking each word with great deliberation and slowness. "The message no doubt relates to war matters."

The Marquess of Stratham nodded, his eyes still grave.

"That is it, precisely."

"And what is this message to be?"

Clearing his throat, the Marquess sat up straight in his chair.

"There are a few concerning matters as regards an impending invasion," he said, sending a jolt of shock through Daniel's frame. "The southeast coast is the expected destination of our enemy, and it is being prepared for battle. However," he continued, as Daniel hung on every word which was being spoken, "we expect there to be a few of the French already making their way into our country as spies, so that they might report on all that is taking place. Some may even attempt to become connected with those in high places, with those who consider, debate, and decide what we are to do next."

"Such as the Duke," Daniel interrupted, seeing the Marquess nod. Daniel knew that the Duke of Abernyte had been involved in the war effort although he was not privy to the role that the Duke might have played. "What is it that I must tell him?"

The Marquess grinned, the severe look in his eyes fading in an instant.

"You will go then?"

Daniel nodded.

"Yes, I will."

"Capital." The Marquess' smile remained fixed. "Then I will write my message for the Duke, and will rest assured that you will give it only to him." His eyes fixed to Daniel's. "I beg of you to keep the seal unbroken, that you will not look inside or read the note under any circumstance."

"I will not."

Daniel lifted his chin, knowing that the Marquess of Stratham – and indeed, the country itself – required his allegiance.

"It is not that I do not trust you, but only that the words contained

within will be solely for the Duke's eyes," the Marquess finished, as Daniel nodded. "It may be that what I write will be proven incorrect, although, given what I have heard…." He trailed off and shook his head. "Very good. I will write it this very hour."

"I will hand it directly to the Duke of Abernyte, just as soon as I return to London," Daniel promised. "You have my word."

Chapter Two

"Are you looking forward to this evening's ball?"

Sarah smiled a little ruefully as she looked back at her cousin, wondering when Miss Florence Addington would stop talking incessantly about the ball which they were to attend that evening. She did not even need to answer her cousin's question, for the lady was already continuing to speak at length about what she herself would be wearing this evening, what color her gown was, and the various trimmings that had been sewn onto it. Sarah, who had heard all of this many times before, stifled a yawn and picked up her book. Attempting to read it proved difficult, however, for Florence was quite insistent that they discuss which gentlemen might be present, and whether or not Sarah had any intention of dancing the waltz – for even if she was permitted, it was still entirely her decision as to whether or not she stood up with anyone.

"I am not sure," Sarah replied, still trying to read her book, but finding herself becoming so frustrated with Florence's inane chatter that she simply could not concentrate on the words which were before her. Sighing heavily, she set her book down and let out a long breath of frustration, which she did not let Florence see. They had only just made their come out and, whilst Sarah had to admit that she was very eager indeed for this evening's event, she was not quite as excited as her cousin! She was quite content to know that yes, there would be gentlemen present and yes, there would be dancing also, but felt no need to continually – and audibly – discuss whether or not certain people would be present and, if so, what they might be wearing.

"The Duke is to attend, is he not?"

Sarah looked back at Florence and shook her head.

"My cousin is not to attend, no," she replied, aware of the small ball of tension that began to roll itself around her stomach. "He is not in London at present, I believe."

The Duke of Abernyte was her cousin on her mother's side, whilst Florence was her cousin on her father's side – although this did not prevent Florence from taking a great deal of interest in the Duke! That was to be expected, however, for the Duke of Abernyte was unwed and unattached at present, and every mother in the *ton* silently

prayed, no doubt, that their daughter would be the one to catch his eye. The gentleman needed an heir and thus, there were many expectant and eager hearts waiting for his return to London.

And it seemed that Florence was one of them.

"Oh." Florence's face fell immediately, clearly disappointed that the Duke was not going to be in attendance that evening. "I had hoped he might dance with me, given that he is practically my own relation!" She laughed and Sarah shook her head, knowing that there was no real connection between Florence and the Duke but finding herself quite unable to argue with her cousin. "Do you know if he is to come to London at all this Season?"

Sarah shook her head.

"I could not say." Her fingers twisted together as she prayed silently that Florence would think of speaking of someone else instead, finding herself growing very weary of the conversation indeed. "Tell me, what will your mother be dressed in this evening?"

This, she realized with relief, was precisely what she ought to have said at the beginning of the conversation about the Duke, for it distracted Florence almost immediately. She quickly began to describe her mother's gown and all the particular trimmings which were to go with it. Sarah let out a long, slow breath, although she nodded and smiled and agreed with all that was being said in the interim.

"Ah, there you are." Her mother walked into the room and interrupted their conversation, forcing Sarah to set aside her book entirely for the present. "Lady Flenshaw will return soon, my dear," she continued, speaking to Florence. "Your mother has decided that her gloves are in need of replacement and has taken the carriage to Bond Street so that she might purchase a new pair for this evening."

A quick glance told Sarah exactly what her mother thought of Lady Flenshaw's insistence that her gloves would not do. She hid a smile and saw the twinkle that sparkled in her mother's eye in return. Lady Flenshaw – being Lady Blackwell's sister – was very much like Florence in her manner. Whilst Sarah had to endure Florence's conversation about the same things over and over again, she was fully aware that her mother had to endure the very same thing with Lady Flenshaw. As if to emphasize that fact, Florence had launched into a discussion of the merits of gloves, immediately.

"Sarah, do go and ring for tea," her mother said, interrupting Florence's flow of words for a moment. "I think we will require a little more refreshment before my sister returns to the house."

Sarah smiled at her mother gratefully, rose, and said she would take a short turn about the house before she did so, stating that she was sure that Florence would keep her mother engaged. Lady Blackwell laughed and flapped one hand at Sarah as if to chase her

out of the room, and Sarah went quickly, glad indeed of a few minute's respite.

She had been sitting with Florence for some time and it felt good to be able to walk for a short while. Stopping a maid, she requested a new tea tray to be sent to the drawing-room and then continued on her way. She climbed the stairs, walked into her bed-chamber, and sat down on the bed, letting out a sigh of relief as she did so.

Her eyes fell on the gown that she was to wear this evening, which had already been laid out for her. A small swirl of excitement ran through her as she thought about the dancing and the conversation which would take place. Despite Florence's ongoing conversation about it, Sarah had to admit that she was a *little* excited. Rising to her feet, she brushed one hand down the fall of the gown, gently sighing with contentment. This was to be her first Season and, having already been presented, she would go into society with the express purpose of finding a suitable match.

Her father, the Viscount, was very wealthy indeed and had promised her an excellent dowry, but Sarah felt herself a little less than inclined to be sold off to whichever gentleman thought her dowry good enough! Instead, she considered, tilting her head just a little as she looked at the gown, she wanted nothing more than to be wed to a gentleman who cared for her and truly considered her. She did not think that to be in love was something that she ought to pursue, but neither would Sarah settle for a gentleman who only cared about the amount of coin he would receive upon their marrying!

"The tea tray has been delivered to the drawing-room, my Lady."

Pulled from her thoughts, Sarah turned around and thanked the maid. Taking a deep breath, she made her way out of the bedroom and back down the stairs, steeling herself for another hour or so of enduring Florence's inane chatter about this evening.

"He has gone to Bath on an urgent matter, I believe, but will return within a few days."

Upon hearing her father's voice echoing up from the hallway below, Sarah stopped immediately, only two steps down the stairs.

"What have you heard from him?"

There was a moment's pause.

"Very little," her father responded to whomever else was speaking. "The Duke does not inform me of a great deal, although, of course, I am glad to do what I can. I am too old and infirm to have any dealings with the war itself, save for taking a message here and there when I can, or contributing in a monetary way."

"For which I am sure there is a good deal of gratitude," the other voice said. "But I must find the Duke of Abernyte at once. There is something I must give to him."

Sarah turned her head and looked behind her, wondering if she ought to return to her bed-chamber and wait until her father had finished his conversation, only for the sound of footsteps to rise towards her.

"If I find out where His Grace is, I shall tell you at once," she heard her father say, his voice a little more commanding now. "You have my word."

This did not seem to satisfy the other gentleman, for a heavy sigh followed her father's words, and only after some moments did she hear both men walking towards the front door of the house, and the other man making an almost grudging final remark.

"I thank you. It seems I must away to Bath, and hope to find him."

Sarah quickly made her way down the rest of the stairs hoping to return to the drawing-room before her father saw her but, unfortunately, as she proceeded to the last few steps, her father reappeared. He looked a little surprised upon seeing her, only for his brows to knot together. Sarah flushed at once. She had never been able to hide anything from anyone, for her expression always told the truth.

"Sarah." Her father lifted one eyebrow. "I fear you have overheard some of my conversation with Baron Northwood."

"I – I did, father," Sarah admitted, unwilling to even consider lying to him. "I did not mean to! I–"

"I thought you were in the drawing-room with your mother and Florence," her father interrupted, although his voice did not rise, and he did not appear to be angry with her. "Else I would not have finished my conversation with him out in the hall." His lips twisted for a moment, and he shook his head, looking away from her as he frowned. "Lord Northwood was most insistent."

"He needs to find the Duke?" Sarah asked, unable to help herself. "Why should he wish to do so with such urgency?"

Her eyes rounded in surprise as her father shook his head, grimacing as he did so.

"The Duke is involved with our efforts in the war against France," he told her plainly. "He and I have discussed matters upon occasion, but I do not always know the particulars. However," he continued, coming a small step closer to her and dropping his voice so that he spoke in low, quiet tones, "the Duke *has* gone away on business – although some of it will be to do with Napoleon's forces, I am certain of it – but he begged me not to speak of it to anyone."

Sarah blinked in surprise.

"But I heard you tell Lord Northwood that the Duke was gone to Bath!" she exclaimed, as her father quickly shook his head. "That was not the truth, then?"

“No, of course, it was not,” her father replied, chuckling quietly. “He is gone to the coast.” His brow furrowed and his smile slipped. “There is rumor of a French invasion, and the Duke is gone to make certain it does not occur, although he fears that there may be some within our own circle who are eager for such a thing to take place.”

This was not the first time that Lord Blackwell had spoken to Sarah about such things. He had, at one time, been in the militia and, since then, had always been involved in one way or the other when it came to defending the Crown. She had an interest in the war and wanted to know what was occurring at any one time, simply so that she did not become a simpleton who cared only about gowns and balls. Her father, after some reluctance, had been honest with her and, since then, had been more than willing to discuss what he knew or what he was involved in at present, where that was permissible. The Duke, when Sarah had last seen him, had also spoken to her about the war against the French forces, and Sarah had been glad to know of what was taking place. It gave her a good deal to both consider and pray about.

“I am only a little acquainted with Baron Northwood and I certainly have no willingness to speak to him about any particular matter as regards the Duke’s whereabouts,” her father continued, giving a small, abrupt shake of his head as though to make quite clear how little he thought of Baron Northwood’s request. “That does not mean that I believe that there is anything untoward in the Baron’s motivations, however. It is only that I am doing as my nephew asked and keeping the matter entirely to myself.” One finger waggled itself at Sarah. “You will not tell anyone anything of this, Sarah.”

“Of course I will not!”

Sarah was a little affronted, thinking that her father did not consider her trustworthy but, instead, the Viscount only chuckled, shattering that perception immediately.

“I know that you are always able to be trusted,” the Viscount said, reaching out to take Sarah’s hand for a moment. “I am only teasing you, my dear.” This was followed by a small frown, his smile fading. “Although you are aware of the seriousness of all that the Duke is involved in.”

Sarah nodded, pressing her father’s hand in return.

“I am, father,” she said, seriously. “I will not say a word. I do hope that the Duke is successful in whatever endeavors he is undertaking at present. An invasion to England’s shores would be a grave matter indeed.”

“I too pray that he finds success,” came the reply, which was followed by her father rubbing at his forehead, his lips pressing tightly together for a moment. “We must not forget the significance of what is

happening far from our shores, my dear. There is so much that might yet take place."

Swallowing hard, Sarah took a moment before she replied, feeling a fluttering of fear in her heart as she considered the war and all that could happen, should England's forces be unsuccessful in their attempted defeat of the French.

"Let us pray that they will have nothing but triumph, father," she said softly, seeing her father's eyes catch hers for just a moment and then hurry away again, as though he did not want to look into her face and give her news that would bring her nothing but distress. "I am certain that they will defeat Napoleon and his forces."

Her father smiled tightly but it did not reach his eyes. Instead, he merely patted her arm and stepped away, leaving Sarah standing alone in the hallway. Her brow furrowed for a moment as she watched him return to his study, feeling greatly unsettled. Drawing in a deep breath, she closed her eyes and let it out again slowly, calming herself as she did so. She had no need to worry, as yet.

"I am to have another new gown for…."

Florence's excited exclamations floated into the hallway and Sarah allowed herself a small, rueful smile. Rather than thinking about the war, Napoleon, and the like, she had now to concentrate on an entirely different matter – the upcoming ball and all that came with it. Allowing a gentle peace to wrap around her heart, Sarah made her way back into the drawing-room and was instantly caught up in the conversation once more, leaving all thought of the Duke and the war far, far behind.

~

"And this must be your daughter."

Sarah blushed as the gentleman eyed her openly, his gaze sweeping from the top of her head all the way down to her feet and back again. Heat seared her, but it was not the pleasant sort. Instead, she found herself a little disgusted by the fellow, and, much to her relief, her mother appeared to feel the same.

"Yes, this is my daughter," Lady Blackwell replied, swiftly making the introductions. "Unfortunately, Lord Sumption, she is already engaged for a dance at present so you must excuse us." She bobbed a quick curtsy and Sarah followed suit, relieved when they stepped away from him. "Lord Sumption is not at all the sort of gentleman I should like you to acquaint yourself with, my dear," Lady Blackwell hissed as they walked away. "I did not like the way that he stared at you!"

"Nor did I," Sarah admitted, feeling a trifle despondent. They had

been at the ball for an hour now and, whilst she had many names on her dance card, none of the gentlemen had encouraged even the smallest flicker of interest in her. “I should not have liked to dance with him.”

Lady Blackwell tutted – not at Sarah’s admission but rather at the thought that Lord Sumption would wish to stand up with Sarah – and lifted her chin a little more.

“You have many acceptable gentlemen on your card,” she stated, patting Sarah’s hand in a reassuring manner. “This is only the first ball of many for this Season. I am sure that, in a sennight or so, you will have many more gentlemen eager for your company and your hand.”

Sarah smiled, looking over at her mother as they made their way as far from Lord Sumption as possible. She made to say something, only for Florence to appear, waving at her furiously from a short distance away. Sarah watched as her cousin said something to her mother and to the gentleman with her, and then hurried over to where Sarah and her mother stood. For whatever reason, the gentleman came with her.

“Oh, is this not just a magnificent evening!” Florence exclaimed, as Sarah nodded and smiled, whilst allowing her eyes to glance at the gentleman beside Florence now and again. “My dance card is quite full! I could not believe it! When Lord Tucker asked if I could stand up with him, I accepted wholeheartedly and handed him my card, only for him to say that it was quite full!”

She trilled a laugh and Sarah felt her smile freeze in place, feeling a little embarrassed for her cousin’s sake. On top of which, Florence had not introduced this gentleman to her or her mother, meaning that he stood, quite silently, next to Florence as she spoke.

“My dear child,” Lady Blackwell began, interrupting Florence and bringing the torrent of words to a close for a short respite. “Might you wish to introduce us?”

She looked pointedly at the gentleman and Florence stopped speaking suddenly, looking over at him as though she had forgotten about him entirely.

“Oh, yes of course!” she cried, waving a hand as though to say the fact that she had forgotten to do so was of little importance. “Do forgive me.” She laughed and patted the gentleman’s arm in a most improper fashion. “This is Viscount Harrogate.” She laughed again, this time slapping the Viscount’s arm. “I should say, he is the *new* Viscount Harrogate, for he has only just taken the title!”

“Good evening,” Sarah said hastily, wanting to interrupt so that her cousin could not say more to embarrass either herself or Viscount Harrogate. “I do hope that you are enjoying this evening, Lord Harrogate.”

She bobbed a curtsey and looked hard at her cousin, waiting for Florence to complete the introductions. It took Lord Harrogate clearing his throat before Florence realized what she had not done.

"Oh, and this is my aunt, Viscountess Blackwell, and her daughter – and my cousin – Miss Sarah Graham."

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance." The gentleman bowed and then turned to Sarah's mother. "Lady Blackwell, I believe I have already been introduced to your husband earlier this evening, in the card room."

Lady Blackwell chuckled, her eyes twinkling.

"Yes, that is most likely where you would find him," she replied, making Sarah blush a little with her mother's frankness. "He finds himself most disinclined to balls, but if there is to be a game of cards then he will make certain to attend with us!"

"I quite understand," came the reply, although this was swiftly interrupted by Florence.

"Not that you are of such a mind, Lord Harrogate," she said, teasingly, her eyes bright as she practically bounced on the spot as she spoke. "You are to dance with me soon, I believe!"

"Yes, indeed," Lord Harrogate replied, although Sarah noticed that his smile appeared a little weary, for his eyes did not quite hold the same delight. She considered him carefully, taking in his stocky frame, his broad shoulders, and the square jaw. His blue eyes were bright but did not gleam with happiness and, whilst his dark hair was neat, it brushed across his forehead and hugged low to his brows. From her assessment, Sarah considered him to be a somewhat serious individual, who was, despite his willingness, perhaps a little less inclined to dancing than Florence considered him!

"Ah, Miss Graham!"

Sarah turned, just in time to see Lord Sumption approach them, his eyes gleaming.

"I thought you were to dance!" he exclaimed, gesturing to Lord Harrogate. "But it seems that the gentleman is already engaged."

This was an easy assumption to make given the way that Florence's hand now pressed on Lord Harrogate's arm, leaving Sarah struggling to know how to respond. She wanted nothing more than to say that she was, in fact, engaged for the first dance but the truth was, she had no excuse. Glancing across at her mother with a somewhat desperate look in her eyes, Sarah forced a smile and looked back at Lord Sumption. He was, once more, studying her with that somewhat licentious eye and Sarah flushed with embarrassment.

"Lord Sumption," she began, slowly, "you find me –"

"You find Miss Graham already engaged for this dance, I am afraid!"

Lord Harrogate interrupted their discussion with a small smile and a shrug, stepping away from Florence who appeared to be instantly upset at such news. Her brow furrowed, her mouth opened in protest – but Lady Blackwell came to stand by her, her hand reaching to grasp Florence's, who, at such a reaction, remained quite silent.

"Yes," Sarah stammered, throwing a quick glance towards Lord Harrogate who, whilst not smiling, had lifted his chin and given Lord Sumption a firm look which dared him to protest. "I am to dance with Lord Harrogate, Lord Sumption."

Just as she spoke, the musicians began to play as if they had waited precisely for that particular moment to begin, and Sarah felt a swell of relief when Lord Sumption stepped back. His face had shifted into a most displeased expression, with his lips twisted and his eyes narrowed, but there was nothing that he could do. Lord Harrogate looked to Sarah, smiled, and offered her his arm, which she accepted at once.

"I am so very grateful, Lord Harrogate," she murmured, as they quickly stepped away. "Lord Sumption is –"

"Lord Sumption is not a gentleman worthy of your consideration, nor your company, Miss Graham," he interrupted, although she did not mind it. "I have been in London only a fortnight and even I am aware that he is not a gentleman suitable for *any* young lady's company."

Sarah smiled up at him, thinking that he had proven himself to be a very considerate gentleman already.

"I do not know Lord Sumption at all, I confess," she replied, as they quickly joined the set. "However, I believe that I was able to make a good estimation of his character in only the first few minutes of our conversation this evening!"

"I do hope that your cousin will not be much put out," Lord Harrogate murmured, bowing as the dance began. "I hope that she will understand."

"I am quite certain she will," Sarah replied, although without much confidence in the matter. Her mother, she prayed, would explain the situation to Florence, but Sarah was quite sure that her cousin would be deeply disappointed to have had the dance stolen from her. "Thank you again, Lord Harrogate, you have quite saved me."

This time, his smile lit up his face and Sarah caught her breath at the brightness that came into his blue eyes.

"But of course," he said as they took their places in the line. He offered her his hand and waited for a moment for her to take it before they began to move through the steps of the dance in perfect synchronization with the other couples.

Chapter Three

The first fortnight in London had gone rather better than Daniel had expected. His arm had healed very quickly and, had he had duties to perform and an estate to care for, he would have returned to the army just as soon as was possible. However, that was not something he could simply choose to do without consequence now, given that he had particular responsibilities as Viscount – although one, at least, was to deliver the note from Stratham to the Duke of Abernyte. Daniel had thought that he would miss being a part of the war effort, that he would dislike every moment he spent in society – but, now, he found himself reacting in quite the opposite manner.

The balls and soirees he attended were quite enjoyable, and he had made many new acquaintances. Having been untitled previously, he had boasted a range of worthy acquaintances, but to re-enter society with a title, a substantial estate, and a fortune seemed to have opened up considerably more opportunities for connections of note. He also had not missed the way that a large number of young ladies were now being presented to him – mostly with eager mothers behind them – but Daniel had no thought of becoming betrothed so quickly. After all, given that he was only newly titled, he needed time to come to terms with all that his new role entailed. Yes, he knew it was practically a requirement for him to wed and produce an heir, but that was not something he considered particularly urgent at this point. There was time for him to find someone suitable. What he was struggling with, however, was the fact that he knew very few people here in London well. He might be introduced to many young ladies but he feared that they were all hoping he might consider them as his future bride. He was not acquainted with many other gentlemen of the *ton*, for he had gone to war fairly early, and before that, as the untitled son of a second son of a Viscount, he had not moved amongst the upper echelons of society at all. Which meant that, as yet, he had no one that he might truly consider a friend.

Not that such a thing matters, he reminded himself as he walked through the park. *You are here to make certain that a message of importance is given to the Duke of Abernyte. That is all you need think on.*

The problem was, however, that Daniel had very little idea as to

where the Duke of Abernyte might be. Having written to the Duke's estate practically the minute he had set foot on England's shores, he was yet to receive a reply. This confirmed, at least, that the Duke was not at home, but did not assure him that the Duke was in London, as he had expected, and as the Marquess of Stratham had expected also. Quite what Daniel was to do now, he was unsure. The note he had placed in a small wooden box which was then put into one of the drawers of his oak desk which sat in the study. Every day, without fail, Daniel unlocked the drawer and opened the box, feeling compelled to make certain that the Marquess of Stratham's message remained there, quite safe.

"Good afternoon, Lord Harrogate."

It took Daniel a moment to realize that the gentleman was speaking to him. He was still unused to being referred to by his title, even after some months, the first few of which had been spent in official mourning for his uncle once he had reached England. Thus he ended up almost ignoring the gentleman who spoke to him. Stammering and flushing with embarrassment, he shook his head and apologized profusely.

"I must beg your pardon," he said quickly, trying desperately to recall the gentleman's name. "I was quite lost in my own thoughts."

"But of course," the gentleman replied, grinning broadly and clearly having no thought of any disrespect or the like. "I quite understand. Such a thing happened to me on more than one occasion when I first took my title."

"I am grateful for your understanding," Daniel replied, still frantically trying to remember the name of the fellow who had spoken to him. "It has been a little trying, I confess!"

The man chuckled.

"You will become quite used to it very soon, I promise you," he stated, reassuring Daniel somewhat. "I remember when I was first announced as 'The Earl of Ware', I looked all about me, automatically expecting my father, before remembering that he was gone."

Lord Ware, Daniel thought to himself, finally able to relax into the conversation. *Of course.*

"I have heard it said that you were in France, at war, however," the gentleman continued, entirely unaware of Daniel's relief. He tilted his head and looked at Daniel with a sharp eye. "Is that the case?"

Daniel nodded, although a slight wariness came into his mind as he answered, recalling the Marquess of Stratham's warning.

"Indeed," he said, making certain not to give away anything of particular specificity. "I was forced to return once the news of my uncle's death reached me. I did not think that I should ever gain the title, but it seems that he had not produced the required heir. Indeed,

he was not even wed until recently!" He shrugged one shoulder, his lips in a wry smile. "I have been told, by various members of the *ton,* that I must not permit myself do to the same thing, to wait too long."

The Earl laughed, his lop-sided grin setting Daniel a little more at ease.

"I am certain that you have been told that by many of the ladies who have daughters they wish to see married and settled," he stated, making Daniel laugh. "Aha! I can see that I am quite correct!"

"I am afraid that you are," Daniel answered, grinning. "I confess that I have been a little taken aback by the number of interested parties." He found himself warming to the Earl, finding him to be – thus far, at least – a good-humored gentleman who had easy conversation. "I did not expect such a thing."

"Ah, but you are a titled gentleman now!" Lord Ware exclaimed, his eyes dancing. "You will have a fortune and an estate and, therefore, excellent prospects! Any young lady who might wish for a contented life might easily consider you to be a perfect match for her. I am certain that you will have many young ladies eager to further their connection with you!"

Daniel shook his head.

"I am not inclined towards matrimony at the present time."

"That will not matter to them!" the Earl exclaimed, making Daniel wince ruefully. "My advice would be to consider them all carefully for their merits, rather than their outward beauty." His smile dropped for a moment. "I find that I also am not at all inclined towards matrimony at present, despite the *numerous* young ladies that are often in my company!"

"Then we share the same considerations," Daniel replied. "I am grateful for your understanding, Lord Ware. It has been both strange and exhilarating to enter society now that my mourning is completed."

Lord Ware nodded, his expression growing a little more serious as he studied Daniel for a moment or two.

"I presume that you had a difficult time engaging in the war effort," he said, his voice dropping a little lower as he began to talk of the gravity of the situation between the warring countries. "I was not there for any great length of time, unfortunately – indeed, my mother was most displeased with me making my way there in the first place – but I felt duty-bound to do so."

Daniel once more found himself hesitating, not quite certain whether or not he ought to speak of the war given the burden he was still carrying at present, given his duty to the Duke of Abernyte and to the Marquess also, but he then considered that to remain silent would only create suspicion.

“As did I,” he agreed, shaking his head. “My mother was also deeply sorrowful upon my departure, but I did not bear the heavy weight of a title when I first left.”

“Nor did I,” the Earl answered, although he did not give any further explanation as to his prior circumstances. “Mothers can be somewhat difficult, can they not?”

Daniel laughed, thinking of his own dear mother, and yet wincing inwardly at the thought of just how much she had laid on his conscience in an attempt to get him to remain at home rather than join the fighting against France.

“Indeed,” he replied, as the Earl chuckled. “But she is glad that I am returned now.”

“And to London too!” the Earl replied, still chuckling. “No doubt she will expect to see you betrothed very soon!”

This time, Daniel could not help but allow a rueful expression to cross his face.

“I fear that you are quite correct,” he replied, thinking to himself that this Lord Ware was, in fact, a pleasantly conversational gentleman whom he found to be very friendly indeed. “I confess that I am less than inclined towards that as yet, however.”

“Oh?” The Earl grinned, his eyes twinkling. “That may be because you are not particularly well acquainted with the ladies of the *ton,* as yet. There are many mothers who will push their daughters forward, of course, but there are a few young ladies who are quite lovely but reserved, in their own way.” His smile became genuine rather than laced with humor. “It is simply a matter of being introduced.”

“And you would be glad to introduce me?” Daniel asked, one eyebrow lifting as the Earl nodded. “That is very kind of you, Lord Ware.”

Lord Ware shrugged.

“I know what it is like to make one’s way to London and find yourself with a lack of acquaintances,” he said, as Daniel smiled somewhat wryly in the awareness that this was precisely the situation he found himself in at present. “I would be glad to help you in that regard, Lord Harrogate, should you wish it.”

Daniel found himself nodding fervently.

“I would be very glad!” he exclaimed, finding himself quite relieved at the offer of friendship. “Thank you, Lord Ware.”

“But of course!” Tilting his head, the Earl considered for a moment. “Might you be planning to attend Lord Winchester’s ball tomorrow evening?”

Thinking quickly, Daniel recalled that he had not only received an invitation, but had accepted it also.

“Yes, I am.”

“Capital!” the Earl exclaimed, holding out one hand to Daniel. “Then I will make certain that you will dance every dance with a suitable young lady, and you will, I am sure, have the most wonderful evening.”

Daniel grasped the Earl’s hand and shook it.

“That sounds wonderful, Lord Ware,” he replied, finding himself looking forward to the evening with a more positive view than before. “Thank you.”

“Until tomorrow.”

The Earl smiled, bowed briefly and then stepped away, leaving Daniel to walk on in the opposite direction. His spirits were lifted and even the sunshine seemed to be a little warmer than before. Yes, he had no certainty that the Duke was here in London but, at the very least, he would have a new connection and one who might, perhaps, prove very useful indeed.

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“And that is Miss Graham.”

Daniel’s eyes alighted on the young lady whom he had danced with some days before. It had been a very odd situation and he had not behaved with the decorum nor the propriety expected of a gentleman - given that he had pulled the lady into a dance which he had already been engaged for, but under the circumstances, he had thought it the right thing to do.

“I am already acquainted with her,” he replied, as they watched her talking and laughing with another young lady. “She was to dance with Lord Sumption – or, at the very least, he was attempting to force her into a dance with himself – and I had no other choice but to step in.” He chuckled at Lord Ware’s twisted expression, seeing how his lip curled. “I confess, I did not know Lord Sumption in the least, but I could tell that the lady was less than inclined to stand up with him!”

Lord Ware grimaced.

“It is good that you did so,” he replied, shaking his head. “Lord Sumption is a gentleman not known for his consideration or kindness when it comes to the ladies of the *ton*.” His lip curled upwards still further into what was almost a sneer. “He is the sort of gentleman that brings down the very term ‘gentleman’,” he continued, now speaking with a little more passion. “He is very wealthy indeed and, of course, bears a title but still, he cannot find a lady to wed him.”

Daniel tilted his head in question.

“Does he actually *wish* to find a bride?” he asked, only for Lord Ware to nod fervently.

“I believe he does, for he requires an heir to carry on his family

line. However, as I have said, no young lady within the *ton* will even accept so much as a request for courtship!" Lord Ware turned to Daniel, his expression still grim. "I would advise you never to seek a connection with him, for it will only ruin your reputation also."

"I can assure you that I have no intention of doing so," Daniel replied, firmly. "I believe I have been introduced to the fellow, but nothing other than that. Although," he finished, a small, wry smile pulling at the corners of his mouth, "I presume that he will not think well of me given that I pulled Miss Graham from his clutches!"

At this remark, Lord Ware broke into a wide grin, his eyes twinkling suddenly with a good-natured humor.

"I presume that Miss Graham, however, was *very* grateful," he said, as Daniel laughed. "She is an excellent young lady and one that I would certainly suggest you pursue an acquaintance with, given the opportunity!"

Daniel lifted one eyebrow.

"You do not care to do so yourself?"

Lord Ware threw out his hands.

"Certainly not!" he declared, still smiling. "I have many years left in me before I must consider the trappings of a wife and children." He laughed, one shoulder lifting in a half shrug. "That is to say, I am well aware of my responsibility, but I have yet no particularly urgent need to produce an heir." His smile slipped for a moment. "There is a younger brother who might step into the role, should it be required."

Daniel said nothing to this, seeing the solemnity which had come over the Earl for a moment and choosing instead to remain quiet. His gaze returned to Miss Graham and, just as he did so, she turned her head and looked directly towards him. For whatever reason – and it was nothing that Daniel himself could explain – the way that their eyes met sent a shiver straight down his spine, which, in turn, then pushed a warmth all through him. It took him a few moments to recollect himself and then, of course, he was required to bow his head to her in greeting, which she returned with a small smile of her own.

"I should think that you must ask her to dance now," Daniel heard Lord Ware say, although he could not easily pull his eyes away from Miss Graham. "She has noticed you and you have acknowledged her." He grinned as Daniel finally turned his head away from Miss Graham and back towards the Earl. "She is, as I have said, a very fine young lady to have in one's acquaintance and certainly ought to be one that you might consider pursuing, should you be so inclined." Shaking his head, Daniel tried to make light of that last remark, but failed to do so entirely, for Lord Ware only laughed as Daniel felt a flush warm his cheeks. "Her mother is not inclined to push her towards any and every gentleman," Lord Ware continued, ignoring Daniel's protest that he

was not at all interested in forming any *particular* acquaintance with any one young lady. “Her father, Viscount Blackwell, is an excellent gentleman although I am not certain if he is in London at present, even though his wife and daughter are here.” He shrugged. “He may only be a Viscount, but his sister’s late husband was a Duke!” Seeing Daniel’s startled look, the Earl nodded eagerly, as though to convey that this was, in fact, the truth. “That title is now carried by his son, the Duke of Abernyte.”

The Duke of Abernyte.

Those words rushed through Daniel’s mind as he turned his head back towards Miss Graham, seeing her now in an altogether different light. Could it be that the lady might know of the Duke’s whereabouts? Could she be trusted to inform him of it, should she know?

“I am a little acquainted with the Duke myself,” the Earl of Ware said, in an off-hand manner, which appeared to state that he did not make much of the connection at all.

“Is that so?” Daniel replied, trying to think quickly and wondering if, after all of the Earl’s kindness and friendliness, he was not all that he appeared at present. “I should like to be introduced to him at some point if you are willing?”

He recalled the Marquess of Stratham’s firm voice as he insisted that Daniel not speak a word of the message for the Duke to any other, that he must be very cautious indeed for fear that those working *against* the Crown might pretend to be great friends of the Duke’s to intercept the message. Daniel had been horrified to hear that there were those in society who were actively seeking the success of the French, whilst appearing to be in support of the King and his forces, but the Marquess was quite insistent that it was so. Could it be that the Earl of Ware was one of those men?

“I should have been very glad to introduce you, certainly,” the Earl replied, spreading his hands and looking a little frustrated, “but the truth of the matter is that I have not seen the Duke in some weeks. In fact, he was here at the very beginning of the Season but, since then, has quite disappeared.” His brow furrowed and he looked away, which only made Daniel’s suspicions grow all the more. “I should very much like to speak to him but it appears it is quite impossible.”

“Mayhap Miss Graham will know where the Duke has gone, since they are cousins,” Daniel suggested, but the Earl merely shrugged.

“I will ask her father, should he ever appear in society!” he declared, making Daniel grin, pushing away his considerations for the present and thinking that he would concentrate on the matter at hand rather than what might be the motivations behind the Earl’s friendship. “But you could ask Miss Graham, should you desire it,” he

finished, as, much to Daniel's astonishment, Miss Graham left the young lady she was speaking with and began to walk towards them. "Look, it appears that she wishes to speak to you!"

Daniel fixed a smile on his face and allowed himself a short bow as Miss Graham approached. Finding that his heart was beating a little more quickly than before, he forced himself to straighten up firmly, his shoulders down and his head held high. He did not want to give Miss Graham any inkling of the surprising flurry of feelings that were going through his heart and mind at present, especially when he did not quite understand it all himself!

"Good evening, Lord Ware, Lord Harrogate." Miss Graham's smile was warm as she spoke to them both. "I do hope that you are enjoying this evening?"

"I am," Daniel replied, all too aware of Lord Ware's glance in his direction as he kept his gaze fixed on the lady. "But I have not my name on your dance card as yet, Miss Graham, which, should you grant me that honor, will, I am sure, make things even better than they are at present."

Miss Graham's cheeks glowed with color as she handed him her dance card, which Daniel took in an instant. Looking down at it, he saw that the next dance, the cotillion, was not yet taken.

"Shall we step out together for the cotillion, Miss Graham?" he asked, just as other gentlemen and ladies began to make their way to the center of the room. "I should like that very much."

"But I will not permit it, Lord Harrogate."

Daniel turned, just as Lord Sumption reached out and grasped Miss Graham's arm.

"You stole a dance from me and I will, in turn, take one from you," the gentleman spat, his eyes narrowed and his face very red indeed. "Miss Graham, you will do as I ask out of nothing more than the honor you owe me, given the cruel trick you played on me during the last ball!"

Miss Graham tried to wrench her arm free of Lord Sumption's grip, but she could not easily do so - and certainly to attempt to achieve her freedom with any greater force would attract the attention of others. Daniel threw a glance to where Miss Graham's mother stood, but she had her face turned away as she conversed with one or two other ladies. He did not know what to do, for he could not force Lord Sumption to drop his hand for fear of raising a commotion but nor did he want to allow Miss Graham to be forced to step out with Lord Sumption!

"I do not think that would be wise, Lord Sumption," he muttered, as Miss Graham threw him a desperate glance before looking down at Lord Sumption's hand as it tightened on her arm. "Your behavior will

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“Release me, Lord Sumption!” Miss Graham’s face, now rather pale, lifted to the gentleman’s. “I will not dance with you.”

Lord Sumption’s chin lifted as he glared back at her.

“You will,” he stated, unequivocally. “I will not be treated in such a poor manner without recompense!”

“Allow the lady free, Sumption.” Lord Ware took a step forward, but it did not convince the gentleman. With the music beginning, he began to pull Miss Graham away from Daniel and Lord Ware, but Daniel could not permit such a thing to proceed, not when the lady was in such a state of upset. Stepping forward, he reached out one hand towards Lord Sumption, intending to force him away from Miss Graham, only for Lord Sumption to suddenly let go of the lady. With his hand now free, he pulled it back and, before Daniel could react, punched him full in the face. What Daniel did not therefore see was how Lord Sumption, despite the horrified gasps of those around him, reached out and pulled a white-faced Miss Graham onto the dance floor before beginning the first steps of the cotillion.

Chapter Four

Sarah looked down at her arm and winced, seeing the light bruises from where Lord Sumption had gripped her. It had been a dreadful evening. Lord Sumption had behaved in both a reckless and disgusting manner, treating her as though she was nothing more than an object forced to do his will. It had not helped that they had been in a quieter part of the room, which meant that there had been less of an audience and, therefore, Lord Sumption's actions had not been witnessed by very many people. Yes, there had been some, but even her own mother had not seen what had occurred. It had upset Sarah greatly and yet, somehow, she had found the strength to dance the cotillion. Her mind had forced her to behave so, knowing that she could not simply walk away from Lord Sumption now that the dance had begun. To have done so would have caused the *ton* to whisper and gossip about her for some time, although perhaps, with the rumors of what Lord Sumption had done now whirling around London, she might have been quickly and easily forgiven.

Of course, the *ton* did not know the truth of the matter, however. Those who had witnessed it spoke the truth of what they had seen, but to those who only heard the whispers, it sounded as though Lord Sumption had beaten Lord Harrogate half to death! Unfortunately, there was also the whisper that she and Lord Harrogate had a considerable affection for one another and that he, in turn, could not bear to see her separated from him by another gentleman. Sarah had been required to reassure her mother that it was not so and that she was barely acquainted with the gentleman, which had led to her mother then stating that mayhap an acquaintance with Lord Harrogate might be a good connection to pursue, given that he was such an excellent and courteous gentleman.

Sarah considered this for a moment or two as she continued to examine her arm. Lord Harrogate had come to her rescue on not only one occasion but two and that, she considered, did make him the very best of gentlemen. She knew little about him, however, although that could easily be rectified should she wish it. Considering this, Sarah smiled to herself before pulling down the sleeve of her dress so that it might hide the bruises and rising to her feet. He was handsome, she

had to admit, but his determination to behave in the best manner at all times was something that she also had to admire. He had not hesitated when Lord Sumption had attempted to pull her to the dance floor against her will and had been treated very poorly in return! She closed her eyes for a moment, recalling when she had first looked back at Lord Harrogate and had seen him being held up by Lord Ware whilst one hand covered his cheek. What she had seen of his face had been tight and lined in pain, which, of course, had then set her heart pounding with fear as she had tried to dance the steps of the cotillion with Lord Sumption. Lord Sumption had danced as though he cared nothing about what had just occurred, about what he had just done. Instead, he had simply laughed and smiled as he danced with her, as though everything was just as it ought to be and as though he had done nothing at all to injure Lord Harrogate.

"My dear?"

Sarah looked up to see her mother coming into the drawing-room. Lady Blackwell's face was filled with concern, her eyes searching Sarah's as if she hoped to take a measure of Sarah's comfort at this present moment.

"Good afternoon, Mama," Sarah replied, warmly. "Lord Harrogate is to call soon. We have only a few minutes." She ignored the kick of her heart as she mentioned his name, waiting until her mother had sat down before continuing. "You are still contented with him calling?"

"But of course!" Lady Blackwell exclaimed, her eyes widening for a moment. "He did what he could to prevent Lord Sumption from treating you in a most unbecoming manner and I cannot thank him enough for what he did." She shook her head and, after a moment, dropped it so that her eyes were now fixed on her lap. "I must express to you my deep regret for what occurred, Sarah. I know it was a great ordeal and –"

"It was not your doing, Mama," Sarah interrupted, speaking hastily. "You need not think that there is anything wrong in that regard."

Her mother did not answer for a moment and, when she did, a heavy sigh first came from her lips.

"I did not pay as much attention to you as I ought," she said, quietly. "Had I been more watchful, then Lord Sumption would not have dared to have done such a thing."

Sarah rose to her feet and hurried to her mother, hating to see her so downcast. "You need not feel any guilt, Mama," she said again, speaking in a much firmer manner. "I believe Lord Sumption would have done such a thing regardless of who was nearby. You know that he is not well thought of amongst the *ton* and I fear that his arrogance and pride would have told him to behave as he saw fit." She smiled up

into her mother's face, taking her hand and pressing it hard. "I will not have you feel guilty for something that was not your doing."

Lady Blackwell hesitated before she nodded, closing her eyes for a moment before giving herself a slight shake.

"Your father will wish to speak to Lord Harrogate also," she said, as Sarah smiled, rose, and returned to her seat. "I know he is very grateful too."

"I am certain we all are," Sarah replied, quietly, only for the door to open and the butler to step inside, ready to announce Lord Harrogate's arrival.

Rising to her feet and ready to curtsey, Sarah was a little surprised at the butterflies that instantly began to flutter in the pit of her stomach. Heat rose in her cheeks as she fought to cover all and any indication of such a feeling, which only made matters worse. In the few short moments that it took for the butler to announce Lord Harrogate and for him to step into the room, she found herself going from a state of absolute decorum to being in something of a fluster.

"Lord Harrogate, my Lady."

Sarah sank into a curtsey and did not lift her eyes to the gentleman until she was quite certain that her cheeks were not as hot as they had been only a few moments before. Putting a smile on her face, she finally allowed herself to look at him, only to see that he appeared a little flushed also. Her mother had gone into an immediate stream of gratitude, coming across to Lord Harrogate and taking one of his hands in both of hers as she spoke with sincere thanks of what he had done.

That is why he appears so, Sarah told herself, unwilling to even consider the fact that he might think her pretty or be glad to be in her company once more. *He is embarrassed at all that is being said.*

This, however, only caused Lord Harrogate to rise in Sarah's estimation once more and she found herself adding to her mother's thanks by speaking to him of her gratitude also.

"I do not think I can express just how grateful I am for your actions, Lord Harrogate," she said, as her mother finally released his hand and made to sit back down, gesturing for the gentleman to do the same. "Lord Sumption behaved most despicably." As the Viscount sat down, Sarah was horrified to see the purple and green bruise that had begun to spread itself across his cheek and up towards his eye. "And you have been severely hurt in the process!"

"Not severely, I assure you," he replied, although the smile he gave her did not reach into his eyes. "It is only a few bruises." He held her gaze for a moment, as if to say that he expected her to understand what he really meant by such a look, such an expression, but Sarah remained quite at a loss. "I have suffered worse."

“Not in London, I hope, and certainly not recently?” Lady Blackwell said, looking surprised, but Lord Harrogate merely smiled and shrugged one shoulder.

“I – I was recently fighting for the King,” he said, making Sarah understand at once why he did not think a bruise to his cheek to be at all severe. “Unfortunately, I was sent home due to an injury but even that was nothing in comparison to the pain and the wounds that others tolerated.” His expression fell and he looked away. “I saw too many men lose their lives, Lady Blackwell, to consider even what I suffered to be of any great seriousness.”

Sarah exchanged a look with her mother, who smiled rather sadly in Sarah’s direction.

“I did not know that you had fought, Lord Harrogate,” Sarah murmured, as the gentleman lifted his eyes to hers. “I am certain that all in society and, indeed, all in England, are very grateful to you for what you did.”

“Would that I could return,” he said, firmly, just as Sarah’s mother rose to ring the bell for tea. “But I am now titled and have responsibilities that cannot be flung to another.”

Another small shrug and a faded smile told Sarah that Lord Harrogate had much tumult going on within his heart about the war and his new requirement for staying in London, but she did not want to press him. They had not that sort of acquaintance as yet, and she did not want to ask him to speak of something which was still so very painful.

“Regardless, I will thank you,” she said, just as her mother took her seat. “I will also state that I am grateful for your return to London given that, without your presence last evening, I might have found myself in even more difficulty!”

Lord Harrogate smiled ruefully and shook his head.

“I am only sorry that I could not dissuade Lord Sumption entirely, Miss Graham,” he answered, as Sarah’s mother let out an exclamation, forcing them both to look at her.

“My dear Lord Harrogate, you must not say so!” Lady Blackwell declared. “Under the circumstances, you did all that you could do! I am only sorry that I was not present, as I ought to have been, for I am certain that, had we all stood against Lord Sumption, he would not have dared to force my daughter to dance with him against her will.”

“I do not like to contradict you, Lady Blackwell,” Lord Harrogate replied, his eyes holding a gravity that sent a slight chill through Sarah’s heart. “But I fear that, even if you had been present by your daughter’s side, Lord Sumption would have done precisely as he chose to do.” He cast a quick glance towards Sarah as though to make certain that she was, in fact, present and not still by Lord Sumption’s

side. “I confess I would have used greater force, had I realized the extent of Lord Sumption’s determination!”

Sarah smiled at him, trying to remove the worry from her heart as she did so.

“I should not have liked you to be injured further, Lord Harrogate,” she replied, as her mother let out a long, slow breath that seemed to push away the lingering anxiety that had hung over them all for the last few minutes. “Lord Sumption is a gentleman to be avoided at all costs, I believe.”

Lord Harrogate smiled back at her, and the air seemed to lighten all the more.

“Indeed, I quite agree,” he answered, his smile turning into a broad grin. “In fact, it is not only young ladies that should avoid him but gentlemen also, for fear that, if they do not, they will end up as bruised as I!”

A little relieved that Lord Harrogate had managed to bring a gentle humor to the situation, Sarah laughed and then turned the conversation to other matters. They spoke of London, of the Season and of the dinners, balls, and other occasions they had attended thus far.

“Have you been in London for the Season prior to this, Lord Harrogate?” her mother asked, as Sarah began to pour the tea.

“No, I have not,” he answered, watching the steam rising gently from the teacups. “My uncle, who held the title before me, passed away somewhat suddenly and once the news reached me, I was forced to return to take it on.”

Sarah rose and picked up the teacup, ready to set it before Lord Harrogate.

“Return?” she queried, as she put it down just to the right of his seat, on a small side table. “Were you gone from England that recently?”

Lord Harrogate nodded, his smile spreading tightly across his face as his eyes hardened.

“I was at war, Miss Graham,” he answered, heavily. “I had no desire to return to England but an injury to my arm and then the news that I was now the Viscount of Harrogate forced me to do so.” He looked up at her and Sarah found herself quite transfixed, as though she could look nowhere else but into his eyes. “Even the months of mourning, the time dealing with my estates, and the Season, I confess, have not yet taken away the urge to return to the army.”

“Were you a soldier, fighting the enemy directly?” she asked, a little tentatively. “Or were you involved in the planning and strategy which must be required when one is at war?”

She was not certain if Lord Harrogate wanted to speak openly of

these things for, given what the Duke had told her when they had last discussed the war, there was often a great deal of difficulty, strife and pain which encompassed every single person there. Looking back at him, she waited with a small knot of tension in her stomach, fearing that she had asked something he would not want to respond to.

"I – I was involved in both," he replied, a little hesitantly. "I did not have a title when I first thought to make my way there, in order to serve the King and my country. The combat was…" he grimaced, looking away from her, "difficult."

"I am sure," Lady Blackwell murmured quietly, as Sarah nodded, almost desperate for him to say more so that the conversation would not end on this awkward moment.

Lord Harrogate let out a long, slow breath, then passed one hand over his eyes.

"There was a matter which required some particular insight," he went on, now looking away from them both and down at his teacup which was still steaming gently. "An assault which we had planned that involved a somewhat treacherous route." One shoulder lifted. "I was asked by the commander to give my insight and, from then on, I became a little more involved in planning what the army might do next."

"I see."

"And were you given any particular responsibilities?" Lady Blackwell asked, even though Sarah shot her a look that stated silently that she thought the conversation about the war might now be best ended. "Surely having had such insight, you must also have been promoted!"

A small, soft smile crossed Lord Harrogate's lips.

"I was very fortunate and was given a captaincy," he replied, quietly. "But I did not enjoy that particular command for long, due to an injury which prevented me from remaining with the army."

Sarah, again, threw her mother a look that she prayed would silence Lady Blackwell on the matter but Lady Blackwell, it seemed, was quite determined.

"An injury?" she exclaimed, as Sarah closed her eyes for a moment, only to sigh a little wearily as her mother continued to speak. "That must have been very trying for you. How did it come about?"

Lord Harrogate's smile was a little tight.

"I fell from my horse," he replied, shaking his head. "I am quite certain that I would have found my end there, had it not been for two other men who pulled me back from the fighting." A sigh left his lips but his smile remained. "And then it was discovered that I now bore a title and, given that there is no heir other than myself, it was made explicitly clear that my responsibilities were back in London. Indeed,

the Marquess of Stratham – who was the Colonel – insisted that I return to London for my own health and because I now had responsibilities to the Harrogate title. And, despite my desire to think otherwise, I have come to see that what the Marquess stated was quite right."

Nodding slowly, Sarah finally saw her mother resting back in her chair and considering what the Viscount had said. With relief that there were to be no more questions from her, Sarah thought about what else she might say to redirect the conversation.

"I am sorry that the country is at war at present," she said quietly, hoping to bring this topic of conversation to an end. "My cousin, the Duke of Abernyte, is hopeful that it will end soon. However," she said, in what she intended to be a much brighter tone of voice, "there will be much to enjoy this Season and I hope that, in time, it will distract you from all thoughts of the army and such like!" She smiled warmly, looking at the Viscount who was, she noticed, watching her with eyes that now seemed to gleam with a sudden interest. "Are you to attend Almack's? There will be a great deal of dancing and joviality, as there always is!"

"I think I am to attend, yes," came the reply. "Might I ask if the Duke of Abernyte will be attending also? I should very much like to become acquainted with him."

Sarah hesitated, the knot of tension in her stomach returning with a fierceness that stole her breath for a moment. Her father had warned her explicitly not to speak of the Duke and his current business to anyone and the fact that Viscount Harrogate was eager to find him made her a little uncomfortable.

He is merely expressing a desire to meet the Duke, she told herself, firmly. *Many gentlemen would be, for to have the Duke as a connection is a significant thing indeed.*

"I am afraid I do not think the Duke is in London at present," she answered, only for her mother to interrupt her.

"Oh, but he will be returning any day," she trilled, waving a hand. "I am certain that he cannot stay far from London for long. Any business he has will be taken care of very quickly indeed."

Lord Harrogate nodded but instead of looking directly at Lady Blackwell, allowed his gaze to rest on Sarah. She looked back at him steadily although, inwardly, her stomach was tight with uncertainty and all the happiness she had felt at being in his company was quickly evaporating. Was there something more to the Viscount? Some business that he wanted that might put her cousin in danger?

The Duke fears that there may be some within our own circle who are eager for such a thing to take place.

The words her father had spoken echoed in Sarah's mind as,

finally, the Viscount looked away. Surely Lord Harrogate could not be someone who wanted nothing more than for the French to take hold of England? He could not be someone who wanted the French to have the victory, surely? He had fought against them, had done all he could to make certain that England's forces would find success.

Unless he had always plotted to do so, she thought to herself, shuddering slightly. The next moment, however, she had drawn breath and told herself to stop being such a goose. She was thinking dreadful things of the Viscount and without any speck of proof that such a thing might be. She was being quite ridiculous, and she ought not to be so.

"I will be glad to introduce you to my cousin, should the Duke return during the Season," she said, seeing how Viscount Harrogate nodded with evident eagerness. "But I cannot say with any certainty as to when that might be."

"That is a great pity," came the reply. "However, I am quite determined that I will make the best of this Season regardless."

A broad smile settled on the Viscount's face, but it took Sarah a moment or two to return it. Given how she was feeling, she was not quite certain that the Viscount's motivations were both honest and true, but neither could she justifiably say that he had any interest in the Duke other than simply becoming acquainted with him.

"I do hope you will save a dance for me, Miss Graham, when you attend Almack's?"

Sarah flashed a quick look to her mother, only to see Lady Blackwell nod with what appeared to be a satisfied smile running across her face. Clearly her mother was very pleased with the connection and would not hesitate to encourage Sarah into a deeper acquaintance with Lord Harrogate. Despite her own feelings, Sarah knew that she could not refuse such a request.

"But of course, Lord Harrogate," she said quickly, finding herself all the more uncertain. "I should be very glad to."

"Capital."

The Viscount rose and Sarah quickly got to her feet. Her mother thanked him again, profusely, for what he had done as regarded Lord Sumption, whilst Sarah herself said the same. And then he was gone, leaving Sarah looking at the closed door and wondering whether or not this gentleman might be a little more dangerous than he had at first appeared.

Chapter Five

Walking into Almack's, Daniel could not help but immediately look for Miss Graham. He had found himself quite taken with her, for she was both striking and entirely unforgettable. The more time he had spent in her company, the more he had come to think of her and, thus, had found himself requesting that she might stand up with him at Almack's for one of the dances. How glad he had been that she had so readily agreed! Daniel fully intended to make certain that he danced twice with the lady, even though he knew that would occasion comment, and had even wondered whether or not he might call upon her again, soon.

There she is.

His eyes alighted on her and, in that instant, Daniel felt his breath catch. Miss Graham was utterly resplendent this evening. On first appearance, it seemed to him as though her gown was white but, as he continued to study her, he realized that it was a very light shade of green. This, he had no doubt, would draw attention to the green in her eyes and, on top of that, might emphasize the contrast with her copper curls which had been so deftly arranged. Seed pearls adorned her hair, and a delicate diamond pendant also caught his eye. All in all, she was quite magnificent, and Daniel felt himself grow very contented indeed with being in her company. His heart was beating a little more quickly than before and an edge of anticipation ran down his spine as he made his way towards her.

Recall that she is the cousin of the Duke.

A small, quiet voice inside stopped him almost at once. He had not brought such a thing to mind, he realized, recalling immediately what she had said about her cousin. It was clear that the Duke had spoken to Miss Graham about the war, perhaps even his particular duties at the present time and, given that he was yet to find the Duke in order to deliver his message, he ought to be thinking of only that rather than giving into his own inclinations. Therefore, there might, as he had previously promised, be one dance, but there would certainly not be two.

Drawing in a deep breath, Daniel let it out again slowly and gave himself a small shake as though to remove even the notion of interest

in Miss Graham herself from his frame. He was being foolish. He ought only to be considering furthering a connection with Miss Graham in the hope of finding out the Duke's whereabouts. The Marquess of Stratham had made it quite clear that this was his one and only task and, as yet, Daniel had failed to fulfil his duty. Having expected to find the Duke in London, he was now in a situation where it appeared that he not only needed to relay his message to him, but also first needed to find out where the gentleman had gone! Silently, he wondered if the Duke was in any difficulty and, if he was, what Daniel might do in order to assist him.

"I must not forget," he told himself aloud, startling an older lady who stood with her back to him. A little embarrassed, he quickly reassured her that it was not she whom he spoke to and, instead, turned away from Miss Graham entirely.

He would not go to her until he could make certain that his thoughts were quite in order and quite correct for the present situation. He needed to make certain that he did not find himself overwhelmed by his admiration for the lady. All that was required of him was to find the Duke and deliver his message. Therefore, what he had to do next was use his connection with Miss Graham to discover whether or not she, or her father, knew where the Duke might be.

There may be those within society who seek the good of France, he reminded himself, picking up a glass of ratafia and taking a small sip before instantly regretting that he had done so. *You must be careful.*

"Lord Harrogate?"

He turned suddenly, only to see none other than Miss Graham standing there, although her mother remained only a short distance away, watching her daughter closely. Clearly, Lady Blackwell was not about to permit something untoward to happen again!

"Miss Graham!" Daniel exclaimed, finding himself suddenly flustered and wishing that he had not picked up the glass of ratafia for he now did not know where to put it or what he ought to do with it. "Good evening."

Bowing quickly, he looked about him for a footman who might take his glass and, finally succeeding in his task, turned back to Miss Graham just as she was rising from her curtsey. The air seemed to go very still in that moment, the noise of the ball fading as he looked into her eyes. They flickered as she looked up at him, although no smile spread across her face. Instead, she simply studied him for a few moments, her expression somewhat questioning as if she were waiting for him to answer a question she had not yet spoken.

"I – I confess that I could not find you, Miss Graham," Daniel stammered, as heat infused his face. "That is to say, I was glad to have seen you, but you were busy with other conversations, and I did not

want to interrupt."

Her expression softened for a moment.

"I see," she answered, her head to the side in an almost bird-like manner. "I saw you, Lord Harrogate, and feared that I had done something to displease you when you turned away from me." She straightened and yet another flare of heat seared Daniel's face. "I do hope you have not forgotten, Lord Harrogate." She smiled and held up her dance card. "I have saved a space, but you must make haste if you wish to claim it!"

Daniel did his best to smile in return, mortified that she had seen him turn away from her.

"That is very good of you, Miss Graham," he told her, taking her dance card. "I should very much like to dance with you if you still wish to stand up with me?"

"But of course!"

Her smile was bright, and the questions faded from her eyes as he wrote his name down in the unclaimed space. Despite his promise to himself that he would not consider her in any way other than as someone who might give him the information he required, Daniel could not help but feel a slight jolt in his heart as he returned the dance card to her, their fingers touching for the very briefest of moments.

"I fear that I would have been entirely unable to secure a dance from you, Miss Graham, had you not been so willing to save a space for me," he told her, putting his hands behind his back. "It seems as though society has nothing but admiration for you!"

This made her blush and look away which, in turn, brought a little gratification to Daniel's own heart.

"You are very kind, Lord Harrogate," she answered, glancing back up at him before looking away again in a demure fashion. "I am a lady who makes certain to fulfill my obligations, however, so you would not have found yourself lacking!"

"I am very glad of it." His brow suddenly furrowed as he saw none other than Lord Sumption appear just to the right of Miss Graham. Seeing him look over her shoulder, Miss Graham glanced behind her only to look back at Daniel quickly, her eyes a little wide and her face paling.

"I do not think you have anything to fear, Miss Graham," Daniel murmured, trying quickly to set her at ease. "Lord Sumption is near to us, yes, but he is in deep conversation with another gentleman." Reaching out he took her hand for a moment and pressed it lightly in what he hoped was an encouraging manner. "In addition," he continued, releasing it, "your mother is watching him *very* carefully indeed and I am certain will swoop down upon him should he even

look in your direction."

This made Miss Graham laugh, although it was a little choked. Another glance over her shoulder made her relax a little more, for it was, she saw, as Daniel had said.

"He is speaking to Baron Northwood," she murmured, speaking of a gentleman that Daniel had not yet been introduced to. "That is strange. I had thought he was to go to Bath."

A little confused, Daniel tilted his head and was about to ask why she had thought such a thing and, indeed, why she would be so very interested in what a Baron was doing during the London Season, only for Miss Graham to look back at him and shake her head, laughing again as she realized what she had said.

"Forgive me, Lord Harrogate," she said, her cheeks holding a little more color. "I am quite embarrassed. I did not mean to speak so. Are you acquainted with Lord Northwood?"

He shook his head.

"I am not."

"My father is acquainted with him," she replied, by way of explanation. "I know that they spoke recently and that there was mention of Bath which is the only reason that I discussed such a thing."

"I quite understand." Daniel's smile slipped as he considered how he might bring up the Duke in the conversation, caring very little for Baron Northwood or becoming acquainted with him. "It is a shame that your cousin is not present this evening, however," he continued, shaking his head in what he hoped appeared to be a slightly frustrated manner. "I had very much hoped to be introduced to him, but it appears that it is not to be!"

This, for whatever reason, seemed to still Miss Graham somewhat for her smile instantly disappeared, her hands clasped together tightly in front of her, and her brows lowered a little further over her eyes.

"My cousin?" she repeated, as though to say she did not know what Daniel was speaking of, only to clear her throat gently as he nodded, perhaps realizing that attempting to pretend that she did not know what he was speaking of to be quite foolish. "Yes, I do not think that the Duke of Abernyte is here, unfortunately," she finished, one shoulder lifting in a small shrug. "I cannot tell you anything more, Lord Harrogate, for I am afraid that my cousin does not inform me of his whereabouts nor his intentions!" She laughed but her eyes remained grave, as though she was a little uncertain as to his reaction. "A Duke is a most important relation, given the connection, but I fear that he could not say the same about myself!"

Daniel joined her in laughter whilst all the while wondering if this was a ploy to attempt to force his interest away from the Duke

entirely. He did not have to take her word that the Duke was not in London, nor that she did not know when he would return. There was something in her expression that made him want to question her further but, instead, he simply sighed once more and looked away, pressing his lips together tightly for a moment.

"That is a pity," he said, eventually. "But I will not allow it to remove my enjoyment from this evening!"

Hoping that he had lightened the somewhat tense atmosphere which had grown between them ever since he had mentioned the Duke, Daniel smiled broadly and, after a moment, it was returned.

"Ah, good evening, Miss Graham!"

At that very moment, the Earl of Ware came to join them, and the conversation then flowed easily, allowing Daniel to watch Miss Graham as she spoke. The way that she smiled, and the brightness of her laughter brought a joy to his heart that he did not think he had ever experienced before – and yet it was something that he forced himself to set aside so that he would not consider it for even a moment. It was not something that he could permit himself to do, not until he had done his duty for the Crown. Despite her beauty and despite his flicker of interest in furthering his acquaintance with her, Daniel knew that he could not permit himself to become in any way distracted – especially given that he did not know her character very well at all and certainly could not be sure that she was not hiding something from him as regarded the Duke's whereabouts!

"You must excuse me."

"Oh?"

Daniel looked to Miss Graham but saw that she was now smiling at someone just behind him. Refusing to appear to be prying, he kept his head facing the lady and waited for her to respond.

"I am to dance with Lord Waterman," she explained, bobbing a quick curtsy. "I look forward to our dance, Lord Harrogate."

"And alas, I am much too late to claim even one, Miss Graham," Lord Ware added, making the lady smile once more. "Good evening."

"Good evening."

She was gone in a moment and Daniel found himself struggling with a flare of disappointment that ripped through his chest as he turned to speak to Lord Ware. He did so in a way that permitted him to watch Miss Graham and Lord Waterman as they stepped out together, although he considered the gentleman more than the lady. Was she smiling up at Lord Waterman more than she had smiled at him? Was there a happiness in her features that he had not been able to bring about?

"I see that Miss Graham has made something of an impression on you, Lord Harrogate!"

Daniel started, only to realize that Lord Ware was speaking although he could not quite recall what had been said. “I beg your pardon, I was not paying your conversation the right attention,” he said, only for Lord Ware to repeat himself – although he laughed as he did so, sending a wave of embarrassment through Daniel’s heart.

“I confess I think very well of her, certainly,” Daniel replied, shrugging. “But aside from that –”

“*And* you attempted to save her from Lord Sumption’s dark intentions,” Lord Ware interrupted, his grin spreading across his face as Daniel attempted to protest. “You have called upon her since then, I have heard!”

Daniel blinked in surprise. “Oh?”

Again, Lord Ware just chuckled.

“You are aware that the *ton* is always able to discover what has taken place?” he replied, as Daniel winced ruefully. “They are aware of what you did as regards Lord Sumption and, therefore, are also aware that you have called upon Miss Graham.”

“I am sure that *many* gentlemen call upon Miss Graham,” Daniel protested, but the Earl was not about to accept such a statement without refuting it.

“Ah, but not every gentleman is so warmly accepted by Lady Blackwell!” he exclaimed, sending a wave of embarrassment over Daniel. “Nor are they then sought out so that they might write their name upon the lady’s dance card.”

His eyebrows lifted and Daniel could not help but laugh, throwing his hands up in both disbelief and surrender.

“Then it seems I am found out,” he replied, as the Earl grinned. “Yes, I certainly admire the lady but that is all there is to my consideration at present.”

“You are not inclined towards courtship and the like?”

“Not at present,” Daniel replied, carefully, “but that is not to say that I might not be willing to change my mind… or to have it changed for me.”

He smiled and shrugged, thinking that it would probably be best for the Earl to consider him a little interested in Miss Graham rather than him pursuing an acquaintance with her so that he might discover more about the Duke.

“Then I do wish you success, in whatever your endeavors may be,” the Earl replied, now returning his gaze to Miss Graham as she danced with Lord Waterman. “What dance do you have with her?”

“The quadrille.”

“Excellent.” The Earl gestured to the other side of the ballroom. “There is a good breeze coming from the open doors this evening and there is space for a short walk out of doors, should you wish to join

me?" Putting one finger at the edge of his collar, he pulled at it gently, his expression changing to one of discomfort. "I confess I am a little hot."

"But of course."

Together, they walked across the ballroom, making certain to avoid the dancers. Daniel was glad to feel the slight breeze brush across his cheek as he approached the wide-open doors, although there was still something of a crush near the door itself!

"Oh, Lord Ware!"

Daniel turned, seeing the Earl suddenly distracted by an acquaintance who had only just greeted him. Instead of lingering with his friend and waiting for the Earl to introduce Daniel to his acquaintance, Daniel merely gestured to the open door and then continued on his way. The Earl nodded, silently telling Daniel that he would join him very soon, and thus, Daniel quickly found his way outside.

The air was cool, and Daniel drew in one or two long, steadying breaths as he stood just outside the door. The flow of gentlemen and ladies making their way in and out of Almack's soon became too much to bear, however, and Daniel was forced to move out of their way. Making his way further along the path and thinking to himself just how very dark it was given the lateness of the evening, he paused only a short distance from the door. Lord Ware would soon join him, and Daniel did not want him to miss seeing where Daniel stood.

"I hear that you want to know of the Duke."

Daniel started violently, hearing the voice but seeing no one. He looked all around him but, in the darkness, could not make out even the shadow of a person.

"I am seeking an introduction to him, yes," he replied, slowly. "You may know that I have only just taken on the title and to have acquaintances of significance is of the greatest importance." Clearing his throat and ignoring the shivers that ran through him at the suddenly strange and uncertain situation, he lifted his chin as though the person near him could see him standing tall and without fear. "Why do you ask? And who are you to ask?"

There appeared to be no answer. Daniel stood stock still, waiting to hear the voice again but none came. Instead, there was only the noise of the ladies and gentlemen in the ballroom which came floating towards him, mixed with the laughter of those who walked near him.

"Is that your only reason?"

Despite his determination not to do so, Daniel started furiously as the voice spoke again, seeming to come from his other side this time. Closing his eyes in frustration, Daniel let out a long breath.

"Yes, it is my only reason," he replied, firmly. "Again, who are you

to ask me such a thing?"

"You were at war," the voice said, as Daniel spun around in an attempt to find out where the voice was coming from. "You must know the Duke."

"I do not, I assure you," Daniel replied, although his heart slammed hard into his chest at the mention of the war. "I can tell that you were not at war yourself, for you clearly have no knowledge of the troops themselves and how they are stationed!"

A quiet yet unsettling laugh came from the man speaking and Daniel twisted around again, growing angry that he could not find the person talking to him.

"What is it that you want?" he asked, a trace of irritation now flaring in his voice. "Why not speak to me in the ballroom? Why seek me out in the darkness, hiding yourself in shadow?" The man laughed again, and Daniel gritted his teeth, his hands clenching tightly. He did not appreciate the laughter nor the man's lack of willingness to express the truth to him. "Speak!" he insisted, but nothing met his words save for the light breeze brushing across his cheek. Angry, Daniel turned around again and reached out, his hands grasping nothing but darkness…. only for his fingers to touch something solid.

"You know the Duke."

The voice was close to him now and Daniel knew he had found the person who was speaking.

"Who are you?" he gritted out, his hands grasping the gentleman's clothes as he shook him, hard. "Why are you so interested in me?"

The man laughed, clearly unwilling to speak a word in answer to Daniel. Growing angrier still, Daniel let out an exclamation of frustration, only for something hard to slam hard against the side of his head. The man had struck out and, as Daniel's hands released him, he struck out again – hitting Daniel square in the face this time and directly into the very same place where Lord Sumption had hit him only a few days before.

The pain was immense, and Daniel let go of the man at once, unable to do anything else. His arm was wrenched backward as his assailant threw Daniel aside and his shoulder – which had, he thought, healed itself entirely – once more let out a scream of pain. Staggering backward, Daniel found himself flailing, losing his balance entirely until he fell to the ground. His head struck something hard as he fell and, despite his attempt to stay conscious, clouds began to form all around him. The pain in his face and shoulder grew steadily until, despite his determination, Daniel gave in to unconsciousness. The last thing he heard was that very same laughter as the man who had spoken to him faded away, lingering in shadow so that he might remain entirely hidden.

Chapter Six

"You appear a little disheartened this afternoon, my dear friend." Sarah smiled a little self-consciously, aware that what her friend Miss Laura Crossley said was quite true. "Your cousin has been very trying of late, mayhap?"

Laughing, Sarah saw that her friend smiled teasingly.

"I am afraid that Florence is always a little trying, although she is very good-natured," Sarah replied, as they walked through Hyde Park together, leaving the carriage behind them so that they might be amongst the *ton* for a while. Lady Blackwell and Lady Newton walked together a few steps behind, each keeping a close eye on their daughters. "She will be present this afternoon also, I am sure."

"Then we shall do all we can to stay far from her, should you wish it," came the reply. "Unless there is some other reason that you appear a trifle dejected?"

Sarah was not quite certain how to answer for, in truth, she was not altogether sure herself. At the present moment, she found herself looking all about for one gentleman in particular, even though he had behaved with such a lack of decorum last evening. Quite why she was feeling such things and having such thoughts for one particular gentleman was a little disconcerting, especially when she was not at all sure of his motivations, and very confusing indeed.

"This is not about Florence, I presume?" Her friend eyed her keenly, telling Sarah that her attempts to remain quite contented had failed entirely. "You appear to be sorrowful over some other matter." She looped her arm through Sarah's. "Tell me, my dear friend," she said, encouragingly. "Is it to do with a gentleman?"

Attempting to let out a laugh that would entirely reject this suggestion, Sarah only managed a small croak which did nothing to convince her friend. Seeing Laura's sharp blue eyes fixed upon her face, Sarah gave a small sigh and waved a hand.

"It is nothing," she replied, shaking her head. "Last evening at Almack's, I found myself in a somewhat strange situation, and, much to my chagrin, I cannot prevent myself from continuing to consider it."

"Well, now I find myself most intrigued!" Laura exclaimed, her

voice sounding quite excited even though Sarah shot her a weary look. “You must tell me what occurred!” She laughed and patted Sarah’s arm with her free hand. “Goodness, first you have Lord Sumption forcing you to dance, with poor Lord Harrogate being given a great injury because of his attempts to prevent Lord Sumption from doing so – and now there is something *new* that has occurred at the ball last evening?”

“It is not quite as shocking, thankfully,” Sarah replied, with a wry smile whilst thinking silently to herself that it was very strange that both situations included Lord Harrogate. “Indeed, I suspect that I am being quite foolish.” Shaking her head, she waved her free hand as though to suggest that the matter be forgotten about entirely. “I need not mention it.”

Miss Crossley stopped walking and, given that Sarah was arm in arm with her, she was forced to do so also. Her friend turned slightly and gave Sarah a long look, her eyes now a little sorrowful.

“You do not wish to tell me, it seems,” she said, as Sarah hesitated, not wanting to upset her friend. “I quite understand, although I should hope that I could be trusted to listen to anything that seems to upset you so.”

“Oh, of course!” Sarah exclaimed, reaching out to press her friend’s hand. “Please understand that it is not because I think your friendship to be lacking in any way, but rather because I am afraid that I think *myself* to be quite ridiculous to even be mulling over it with such deep consideration!” Seeing her friend’s slight frown, Sarah let out a long breath, slipped her hand through her friend’s arm once more, and resigned herself to speaking of what had occurred the previous evening. “If you must know,” she began, as they began once more to walk together, “I find myself a little upset about the ball last evening because a gentleman that I had expected to dance with me did not appear!” Giving her friend a sidelong glance, she shook her head. “It is foolish to wonder at such a thing, I know, but it was a little embarrassing and, if I am truthful, I was somewhat surprised.”

Miss Crossley nodded slowly, her brows low as she frowned, and her lips a little pursed.

“I did expect him to appear at some point and explain why he had been absent, but I went through the whole evening without ever seeing him again!”

“And you are afraid that you have done or said something which has upset this particular gentleman?” Miss Crossley asked as Sarah nodded. “That is very unusual, of course, but I cannot imagine that it was something you had done.”

Sarah twisted her lips and did not immediately answer. She wanted to tell her friend that she thought very highly of Lord

Harrogate but that she was also a little concerned over his intentions, given that he had asked her about the Duke on two occasions thus far, but to go into such detail was not necessary. It was confusing enough as it was, but to go into a discussion about the matter was far too much to consider, especially as it touched on her father's stipulation to not speak of matters of the Duke of Abernyte's activities.

"I must hope that you are correct," she said, trying not to give away the true depths of her concern and embarrassment concerning the possible reasons for Lord Harrogate not appearing last evening. She had been left standing, looking all about her as she waited for him to appear so that he might lead her to the floor, only to realize that he simply was not about to do so. Her cheeks had glowed with heat, her head had dropped, and she had felt more embarrassment than ever before. She had begun immediately to think of reasons why he had not come to collect her, but try as she might, she could not think of anything at all. Sarah had not seen him for the rest of the evening. She wondered if he had been taken ill and had, in turn, been forced to return home sooner than he had anticipated, but surely he would have found a way to either inform her or would have written to her this morning to express his apologies!

"Might I ask the name of the gentleman?" she heard her friend ask and turned her head so that she might see Laura a little better.

"It was Viscount Harrogate," Sarah answered, a little embarrassed to speak his name when her friend already knew that he had been the one who had attempted to save her from Lord Sumption's demands. "He had written his name for a dance and yet he did not appear when the time came" she continued, seeing her friend attempt to speak, and determined to finish her sentence. "That is despite the fact that he wanted very much to dance with me, for he asked me to save him a dance when he came to call the previous day!"

Whilst Sarah had been speaking, Laura's eyes had widened, and her eyes seemed to sparkle. The moment Sarah had finished, Laura burst into a hurried speech, making a great many exclamations as she did so.

"Oh! But my dear friend, I know precisely the reason!" she cried, as Sarah stopped walking and turned to face her friend in bewilderment. "But this is all too exciting!" her friend continued, throwing up both her hands. "My goodness! I cannot believe that you are so unaware of it, for it was a very great shock and the *ton* are still attempting to come to some sort of conclusion about what happened."

A knot of fear slowly began to tie itself into Sarah's mind.

"What do you mean, Laura?" she asked, almost too afraid to hear the answer. "Is something wrong?"

Laura let out a small squeal, grasped both of Sarah's hands and

looked fixedly into her eyes.

"My dear friend, Lord Harrogate did not dance with you last evening because he could not." She took in a deep breath and Sarah had to force herself not to interject, her fingers tightening as she grasped her friend's hands. "Lord Harrogate was found in the gardens last evening, in a state of unconsciousness!" Sarah caught her breath, one hand going to her mouth as shock rushed all through her. "I am speaking the truth, I assure you!" Miss Crossley continued, although the tone of excitement with which she spoke did not please Sarah in the least. "He was found last evening after almost everyone had left the ball. I do not know the details, but it appears that he was quite injured and very, very cold despite the warm evening." Seeing the shocked expression that had now formed on Sarah's face, Miss Crossley's excitement began to fade. "I am sorry to have to inform you of this, however," she said, just as both of their mothers drew near. "You did not know?"

"Are you both quite well?"

Sarah forced herself to turn towards her mother, feeling as though she had been standing outside in the cold for a long while and now was struggling to move her limbs. She could hardly take in what she had heard, feeling both dreadfully sorry for Lord Harrogate and a little afraid of the possibilities which came to mind when she considered why such a thing had occurred. In her heart, she began to worry that Lord Sumption was the cause of Lord Harrogate's injuries and that he had, once more, been attempting to aid her.

"I have just now heard about Lord Harrogate, Mama," she answered, her voice a little thin. "I did not know of it until this very moment!"

Lady Blackwell nodded and gestured to her friend.

"Indeed, we are having the very same conversation," she replied, although her sharp eyes did not miss the slight pallor to Sarah's skin. "To think that we were in the very place where such a dreadful thing occurred! I cannot imagine who would do such a thing to Lord Harrogate. It is not as though he has made any great enemies."

"Indeed not!" Lady Newton agreed, her expression rather grave. "Lord Harrogate, to my knowledge at least, is a gentleman of consideration, with a rather quiet demeanor but excellent manners. Besides which, he has only been in London for a short while. I cannot imagine that he would have made any great enemies in such a short duration!"

"I am sure that he has not."

However, as Lady Blackwell spoke, she looked directly at Sarah who, in turn, closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. It was best that Lady Blackwell did not mention Lord Sumption in this

conversation, for it might then easily turn to rumor and whisper and Sarah did not want that. After all, she had no knowledge whatsoever about what had occurred last evening and to suggest that one particular gentleman might be to blame would be very foolish indeed.

"But that explains why he did not dance with you, at least," Miss Crossley finished. "I do hope that relieves some of your worry."

"It does, of course."

Sarah tried to inject some sort of relief into her voice, but failed miserably, and even though her friend looked at her sharply, Sarah did not have the wherewithal to explain herself. Whilst she was glad to know the reason for Lord Harrogate's absence from her side during the ball, she was deeply discomfited to hear that he had been injured yet again.

And Lord Sumption was present last evening, she reminded herself. *Surely he could not have done such a thing?*

"You must think very well of Lord Harrogate, Sarah." A little surprised, Sarah looked at her friend, but Miss Crossley was not yet finished. "It is clear to me that you are more than a little overwhelmed by the news of his difficulties," Miss Crossley continued, a small smile lifting one corner of her mouth. "With his attempt to protect you from Lord Sumption, I must presume that he has made an excellent impression upon you."

Sarah went to answer, only for two gentlemen to greet them with loud, delighted voices which forced them both to end their conversation and to begin a new one with them, as their mothers looked on approvingly. She smiled and laughed and conversed with a little difficulty, forcing herself to push all thought of Lord Harrogate to the very back of her mind. And yet, she knew that he lingered there still and that she would have to give a great deal of consideration to all that she had now heard, as well as thinking of her reaction to hearing of his injuries. Was her friend correct in stating that Sarah clearly thought well of Lord Harrogate? Or was it that she was somewhat uncertain of him and, thus, was all the more perturbed to hear what had taken place? Sarah bit her lip as her friend carried the conversation with the two gentlemen, knowing that she could not yet answer her own questions.

Was Lord Harrogate just as he seemed, or was there more to his interest in her acquaintance than there appeared?

~

"Good evening, my dear."

Sarah looked up from her book as her father walked into the room.

"Good evening, Father."

He smiled at her and then came to stand in front of the fireplace, clearly enjoying the warmth which came from the glowing embers.

"I was glad to meet Lord Harrogate," he said quietly, forcing Sarah back into considering the gentleman whom she had spent most of the day trying to forget. "It was a most unfortunate incident, however."

"With Lord Sumption?" she asked, setting her book aside. It was not often that her father lingered in the same room as her – and even more rare that he was not distracted by some business or letters or the like. "Yes, it was most unfortunate, but I am certain that such a thing will not occur again."

"I must hope not," her father replied, gravely. His eyes darkened for a moment as he studied her, clearly thinking on what his wife had told him of the matter. "I had every intention of speaking to Lord Sumption myself, but my dear wife has insisted I do not."

"I fear that such a thing would not bring any benefit, Father," she answered, although her heart softened at the clear desire her father had to defend her as best he could. "Lord Sumption is a man whom everyone knows to avoid – and for good reason." She shook her head. "I will not permit him near me again, even for a moment." Tilting her head, she remembered something. "He was present at Almack's last evening, speaking to Baron Northwood, but I made certain to stay far from him."

Her father's brows rose.

"Baron Northwood?" he repeated, as Sarah nodded. "That is something of a surprise. I thought the Baron had a little more good sense than to make an acquaintance of Lord Sumption."

"And I thought that you had said that he was gone to Bath?"

Hesitating for a moment, Lord Blackwell tipped his head slightly and shrugged.

"I do not recall," he replied, before wandering a little away from the fireplace and then sitting down heavily in a chair. "I have had so many conversations of late that I find myself quite confused with them all!" He laughed and Sarah smiled back at him indulgently, knowing full well that her father was not at all in his dotage. "Although I confess that I am still a little concerned about my nephew." His smile faded and his gaze returned to the fireplace, leaving Sarah to look back at him quietly, wondering whether or not she ought to ask anything more. "You know that he is gone to the coast, I believe?"

"Yes, father," Sarah confirmed. "You told me of it before."

Lord Blackwell nodded.

"He was meant to write to me, to confirm that he had reached the coast in safety, but I have not heard from him."

A small, tight hand gripped Sarah's heart but she lifted her chin and refused to give in to the threatening fear.

“I am sure that he has only been somewhat distracted by the many duties which require his attention at present,” she said softly, not wanting to add to her father’s worry. “He must be very busy indeed.”

Her father nodded but did not look at her. He rested one elbow on the arm of his chair, his chin resting on his hand as his eyes remained fixed on the glowing fire, clearly lost in thought. Sarah did not want to ask him anything more, for fear that she would interrupt his thinking, aware now that her father had much to concern him. Whether it was about the war effort or the Duke himself, there were many things that Sarah herself did not know, and was not permitted to know of, either. She appreciated that her father came to speak to her very often about such matters – it seemed that Lady Blackwell was not at all inclined to know anything of the war – and whilst she could listen to him and ask questions about those matters, there was a great deal that Sarah was aware she did *not* know. Precisely where the Duke was and what his duties might be at present, Sarah had very little idea.

“You are very good to listen to me, my dear.” Her father shifted in his seat and let his hand fall to his lap. “Most likely, you are correct. The Duke is taken up with matters relating to the defense of the coast and has merely forgotten to pen me a note.” She smiled at him, only to see him shift in his seat, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him. His eyes were piercing. “You have not had anyone asking about the Duke, my dear?” he said, sounding rather grave. “I ask you only because, whilst I know you will take the greatest of care as regards your cousin, there may be someone who has more than a merely passing interest in making his acquaintance.”

Sarah opened her mouth to speak of Lord Harrogate, only to close it again. Frowning, she hesitated for a moment or two before she answered, seeing her father’s keen gaze.

“I know that you have spoken of the need to take great care when I speak of the Duke, Father,” she said, slowly, “and thus, I have behaved so.”

Her father nodded but did not drop his gaze.

“There have been those who have asked about him, then?”

“Yes,” she admitted, “but only in passing and only because they sought an acquaintance with him that came from nothing more than an interest in furthering themselves in society.”

Quite why she was stating such a thing instead of telling her father that Lord Harrogate had asked twice about the Duke of Abernyte, Sarah did not know, but there was something within her heart that was preventing her from speaking of her concerns at the present moment.

“I see.”

“I recall that you said there was a notion that there might be those in society who seek the success of France,” she said, seeing her father sit back in his chair and rub at his forehead. “Do you still believe that to be the case?”

It took some minutes for her father to answer but, when he did, it was with a heavy sigh and a nod.

“As you know, my dear, I was once in the militia,” her father spoke with a gravity that seemed to fill every part of the room. “Even when I had to take on the duties of the title, I made certain to do what I could to aid the King.” Shaking his head, he let out a long, heavy breath as his brows lowered over his eyes. “I confess that I find this new threat to be one that I had never contemplated before.” Sarah swallowed hard, her stomach tightening as she took in the seriousness of their present circumstances. “To know that there are men within society, men within our acquaintance, who seek the success of France and, therefore, the failure and the defeat of England and our King, is a dreadful thought indeed,” he finished. “And yet, that is precisely what we must now fight against. The Duke is gone to make certain that the threatened invasion to our coast does not take place *and* to uncover the names of two or three gentlemen who have been doing all they can to bring such an invasion about.” Passing a hand over his eyes, he let his shoulders slump as a weariness filled his features. “You must be very careful indeed, my dear, as to what you say of the Duke and to whom you say it.”

“I will, father,” she promised, her mind filled once more with thoughts of Lord Harrogate and her confusion over him. “I will be very careful indeed.”

Chapter Seven

The light that streamed into the bed-chamber brought Daniel no joy. His head ached terribly, and he threw one arm across his eyes, blocking it out as best he could. A groan escaped his lips as he did so, recalling too late that his shoulder and his arm were, once more, throbbing with pain.

"My Lord, you have a visitor." Daniel groaned again, much more loudly this time, but the footman remained where he was regardless, clearly a little uncertain as to what he ought to say in reply to the gentleman who had called. It was early still and much too early for callers! "Should I ask him to return at another time?"

"Yes." Daniel grimaced as he forced his arm back down by his side and allowed the sunlight to once more, flood into the room and into his face. Seeing the footman turn away, he let out another exclamation of both frustration and pain, which stopped his servant again. "Wait!"

"Yes, my Lord?" The footman was back at Daniel's side in an instant, his face a little pale as though he expected Daniel to remove him from his position almost immediately for simply doing what was expected of him.

"Might I ask who has called?" Daniel asked, moderating his voice a little more so that he did not appear so brusque. Yes, he was still in pain but that did not mean that he had to speak with such abruptness. He did not want his staff to think him a brute. "Is it someone of note?"

Surely, it would have to be – or at least the visit itself would be of importance – for them to call before visiting hours. The footman did not reply, but merely held out the card of the gentleman who had called. Daniel took it at once and read the name which was upon it, his brow lifting slightly.

"If the Earl will not mind waiting for a few minutes while I dress, then I will see him," he said, handing the card back to the waiting footman. "Have him wait for me in the drawing-room and make certain that refreshments are prepared."

The footman swallowed, nodded, and left the room with eager feet, as Daniel sighed heavily to himself. No doubt his valet would be with him in a few moments, and he would have to make certain that he

was in a better frame of mind than when the footman had first arrived.

He sighed again and forced himself to his feet, despite the urging of his bed to remain within its warm confines. He had rested these last two days and, last evening, had fully intended that today he would be up with the lark and perhaps even take an early morning stroll through Hyde Park. However, his shoulder had been most painful indeed through the night and thus, Daniel had found himself eager to remain at rest for a little longer. Besides which, he had not yet finished thinking about what had occurred and what such an incident might mean. There was clearly an interest in the Duke of Abernyte from some other party but, as yet, Daniel had no thought as to who it might be, and neither did he know *why* they would have such a particular interest.

"My Lord."

His valet appeared in the doorway, and Daniel's thoughts were sent scurrying back. Nodding, he allowed his valet to quickly set to work making him presentable for the Earl of Ware's visit. There would be time to think on the matter soon enough.

~

"Ah, so you are not as grievously injured as they say!" The Earl of Ware chuckled and rose to his feet as Daniel entered the room, throwing him a wide smile. "I had heard that you were on the very brink of death!"

"It is not quite as bad as that," Daniel replied, with a wry grin. "I do apologize for keeping you waiting." He gestured for the Earl to sit down whilst he made his way to a chair opposite.

"It is I who ought to apologize," the Earl replied, as Daniel rang the bell, signaling that he was ready for his coffee to be brought in. "I have arrived very early indeed and without any sort of explanation."

Daniel shrugged one shoulder.

"I would have thought that a friend's concern is a good reason for one to call," he replied, making the Earl chuckle. "Unless you have come for another reason?"

One eyebrow lifted as he waited for the Earl to refute such a thing, only for him to tip his head and study Daniel carefully.

"I will be truthful," the Earl replied, after a few moments. "I am, of course, concerned for your welfare as I would consider myself a friend, but I am also intrigued to know precisely what happened to you that evening!" He frowned and the light faded from his eyes, leaving a cold interest flickering there. "I heard that you had fallen in the darkness, but various people also stated that you had been badly

attacked!"

Nodding, Daniel shrugged his shoulders.

"Both such statements are quite true," he answered, wondering just how much he ought to reveal to the Earl. "I was both attacked and, as a consequence, fell backwards and struck my head."

"Which led to your state of unconsciousness."

"Precisely." Hearing the rap on the door, Daniel waited until his coffee had been brought in and set out in front of him before he continued speaking, making certain that the maid had closed the door behind her before he did so. "I cannot tell you the name of anyone who was involved in the incident, however," he said, as the Earl frowned hard. "I did not see their face nor recognize their voice."

The Earl's lips twisted, although his eyes remained fixed on Daniel.

"Was there more than one person?"

"I could not say for certain," Daniel replied, truthfully. "When it came to the end of our somewhat stilted conversation, I was able to place my hands upon one gentleman, at least." Frowning, he rubbed one hand over his eyes as he tried to recall everything precisely. "I am certain that there was only one gentleman there at *that* time, although whether or not there were two who spoke to me, I could not say for certain."

"I see." Lord Ware shook his head in evident confusion. "Might I ask what was said?"

"It was nothing of importance."

Daniel felt the reluctance grow steadily within him. He did not like having to always be so cautious, always speak with such great consideration, but neither did he want to speak of the Duke for fear that the Earl of Ware himself might be someone who sought the Duke harm.

"Lord Harrogate." Much to Daniel's surprise, the Earl of Ware got to his feet and began to stride about the room in a very impatient manner. "I – I fear that there is a good deal that is being left unsaid," he continued, whilst Daniel sat back in his chair, a little astonished at the gentleman's sudden behavior. "When I heard that you had been involved in the war with France, I immediately thought we might become friends, for we have both endured the difficulties and the trials that come with being a part of the war effort."

"I understand, and I would say that I am glad of your friendship," Daniel said slowly, his heart beating a little faster as he wondered what the Earl was to say next.

Could it be that the Earl of Ware had been the one who had attacked Daniel in the gardens? Given that such an attempt had failed, was he now about to state outright precisely what it was that he now required from Daniel? Looking about him, Daniel wondered if there

was anything he might use as a weapon, should he need to defend himself, only for his attention to be drawn back to Lord Ware.

"I am aware, Harrogate, that you are seeking an acquaintance with the Duke of Abernyte," Lord Ware continued, speaking a little more quickly now. "I believe that I informed you that I was slightly acquainted with the Duke and, indeed, wished to speak to him also, but that I had not seen him since the very start of the Season."

"Yes, I do recall."

Daniel's whole body beginning to tense as he waited for Lord Ware to speak the truth of his situation to him. Clearly, this was about the Duke of Abernyte, and Daniel was a little fearful as to what might now be revealed. Had he been foolish to consider the Earl of Ware as a friend? He had been glad of the acquaintance but had always reminded himself to be on his guard, only for him now to realize that he had not been as wary as he ought.

It does not matter, he told himself, as Lord Ware continued to pace up and down the room. *I will not give the note to anyone but the Duke.* Determined, he lifted his chin in defiance, ignoring the stab of pain in his shoulder.

"I am concerned for the Duke's welfare," the Earl continued, speaking a little more quietly now. "I do not know where he has gone, nor if he intends to return to London. I was aware that he intended to take his leave for a few days, but it has now been at least three weeks and…." Trailing off, he turned back to Daniel as though realizing what he had said and how much more he needed to explain. "The Duke of Abernyte and I were involved in a particular mission when we were both on the front lines," he explained, as Daniel blinked quickly, a little surprised by the news. "We had been tasked to discover which of the men present with us were sharing news of our plans to the French." Even more astonished, Daniel sat back in his seat and stared at the Earl, having never expected to hear such a thing. "It was not a pleasant business and one that I do not like to speak of," Lord Ware continued, a little heavily. "We found three men who were being paid handsomely to deliver notes to the French, to inform them of what we intended and where we would next make our assault. However," he continued, quietly, "I am certain that there were a few more of the same ilk within our rank."

"And you believe that these gentlemen might now be back in England, and doing what they can to provide a way for the French to succeed in their endeavors," Daniel finished, seeing the surprise leap into Lord Ware's expression as he finished speaking. "Is that not so?" A hardness came into Daniel's voice as he spoke. "You may well ask me how I know of such things, but I might begin by asking you whether or not *you* are one of those gentlemen!"

For a few moments, Lord Ware said nothing. Instead, he simply stared at Daniel as though he could not quite understand how he had come to know of such a thing and what precisely he meant by putting such a question to him!

"I hardly know what to say," came the eventual reply, with Lord Ware's voice low and quiet now, instead of filled with a hurried eagerness to speak. "How strange it is that I have had the very same thought of you!"

Daniel frowned hard, his eyes narrowing as he studied Lord Ware. There was not enough of an acquaintance between them for him to trust every word that the gentleman said, and now for him to level the very same accusation against Daniel which Daniel himself had just spoken of him made things all the more confusing.

"We cannot trust each other, it seems," he said, tightly. "I will state, quite clearly, however, that I have nothing but respect and consideration for the Crown and would never permit myself to be so taken in by any lure of wealth or grandeur offered by the enemy." His hands tightened into fists despite the pain in his shoulder, and it was all Daniel could to do speak calmly. "I was not a Viscount before and had no wish to bear a title. Why would I seek more when even what I have is more than enough?"

"I should point out the very same about myself, given my somewhat higher title," came the rather scornful reply, "but that would mean nothing to you, I am sure."

Daniel shrugged one shoulder.

"I cannot know a gentleman's heart," he stated, crisply. "You may say that you need no more wealth or the like, but I cannot be certain that such a thing is the truth!" He narrowed his eyes a little more. "I was told expressly that there were those within society who would seek the good of France. I was also told to speak to the Duke on a matter of urgency. That is all I have been tasked with and that is all I seek to do." He tipped his head and regarded the Earl coldly. "I do not know what your purposes are."

"I wish to speak to the Duke also," came the reply. "I need not explain to you my reasons for doing so, given that there is no trust between us." A hard laugh came from Lord Ware which set Daniel's teeth on edge. "Needless to say, I will be close by during the rest of your time in London, Lord Harrogate. I will be present the moment the Duke returns… unless I hear a positive report from Lord Stratham, I will think you nothing other than an enemy of the Crown."

Daniel was about to throw back a hard retort, only for his anger-clouded mind to realize what he had just heard. Closing his mouth, he pressed one finger to his lips as he thought quickly.

"You are speaking of the Marquess of Stratham," he said slowly,

seeing once more how Lord Ware's eyes widened in surprise. "He is the very gentleman who tasked me with this particular endeavor."

For a few minutes, nothing more was said. In fact, both Daniel and Lord Ware simply looked at each other, their minds filled with questions. Being entirely uncertain as to whether or not he could trust Lord Ware, Daniel now found himself beginning to think that he ought to give the gentleman the benefit of the doubt. After all, he had mentioned the Marquess of Stratham without ever realizing that Daniel himself knew the man.

The seconds ticked by slowly as Daniel waited, feeling himself begin to relax. Lord Ware shifted from foot to foot, although his shoulders dropped and the angry look that had been fixed to his features now started to fade away. The atmosphere slowly shifted, for the cloud of tension, distrust, and anger which had filled the room now began to change to something entirely different. In fact, it began to clear entirely, allowing Daniel to breathe a little more easily as his hands uncurled from the tight fists he had held them in.

"I believe, Lord Harrogate, that we find ourselves at something of an impasse." Lord Ware made his way back to his seat and sat down heavily, leaning forward, and placing his elbows on his knees. "You are not sure whether you can trust me or not, and I find myself in precisely the same position."

"Indeed," Daniel replied, slowly, "but you have spoken of Lord Stratham and that, I think, has given me cause to consider you most likely entirely loyal to the Crown."

A glimmer of a smile pulled at Lord Ware's mouth.

"That is a relief," he answered, as Daniel watched him carefully, "for I assure you that I am nothing but loyal to the King. I have, however, written to the Marquess of Stratham and expect to hear from him soon." His smile grew steadily. "In fact, I wrote to him the very moment that we were introduced, for knowing that you had only recently returned to England, I wanted to see if Lord Stratham knew anything about you." He shook his head. "I am attempting to be of assistance to the Duke of Abernyte given the situation at the coast and the growing concern that there are those amongst us who are eager to assist the French." Once more, his eyes lifted to Daniel, considering him carefully. "I must be certain that you are not one of them."

Daniel let out a long breath, feeling almost a little relieved that they had finally been able to discuss what had been in the back of his mind ever since his acquaintance with the Earl of Ware.

"I assure you, I am not," he said, finding that his heart was now pushing him towards trusting Lord Ware. "I have been looking for the Duke at the Marquess of Stratham's instruction – when you hear from him, I am certain that he will confirm it."

Lord Ware nodded silently, his jaw still tight although there was no longer any anger in his gaze. In that moment, Daniel made a decision. He would trust the Earl of Ware. He had no-one else with whom he might speak about the matter, no-one else who might understand his struggle and, if he was to find the Duke, then he might require the Earl's assistance.

"I will be frank," he said, calmly, sitting back in his chair. "Lord Ware, I need to find the Duke on a matter of urgency. I was told that he would be in London and, given that he is not present, I am not at all certain what to do next."

It took Lord Ware a moment to reply but, when he did, it was with an expression of resignation, as though he realized that his best decision would be to trust Daniel for the time being.

"In this circumstance, neither am I," he answered, sighing. "The Duke has been absent for some weeks. I have been waiting for him to return so that I might speak to him about a matter regarding one particular gentleman." He did not speak the name of the gentleman, however, clearly a little too uncertain about Daniel's motivations at present. "I do not know where he might be."

Daniel hesitated, then spread his hands.

"It seems that there *are* those in society who wish to know also," he said, finally willing to tell the Earl everything that had happened to him during the ball at Almack's. Quickly he explained all that he remembered, of what the voice had said, and the apparent interest that the unknown gentleman had in the Duke. As he spoke, Lord Ware's face grew all the more serious, for his brows furrowed, his lips pulled tight, and his shoulders set straight as Daniel went on. "They too must have heard that I was returned from the war – or that I have been seeking an introduction to the Duke."

Lord Ware looked across at Daniel sharply.

"You have been asking to be introduced?"

"Yes, but I have asked only yourself and Miss Graham," Daniel replied, quickly. "I have not been seeking him out in any other manner, nor asking every acquaintance I know whether or not they have seen the Duke!"

"Miss Graham," Lord Ware murmured, rubbing his chin for a moment, his gaze now drifting away towards the window. "I know that she is a cousin to the Duke."

"And yet I would state that she appears a little reluctant to talk of him also," Daniel replied, carefully. "That may be because she genuinely does not know anything about where he is at present or because –"

"Or because there are some things which she does not wish to talk of for fear of exposing him… or herself."

It felt as though something had punched Daniel hard in the stomach as he looked back at the Earl of Ware. There was, of course, the chance that Miss Graham and her family were involved in the war effort for the opposite side rather than their own. He did not want to consider it for long for, whilst the thought had entered his head already, he had refused to contemplate it for long.

"I confess that I have wondered just how someone knew that I was seeking out the Duke," he answered, seeing Lord Ware's hard gaze. "I had spoken to you of seeking an acquaintance with him –"

"But I did not attack you in the gardens!" Lord Ware interrupted, a harsh redness flaring into his face. "You might ask those I was speaking to at the time, should you wish to confirm my whereabouts!"

Daniel held up both hands in a gentle gesture which appeared to calm Lord Ware almost immediately.

"As I was saying," he continued, as Lord Ware sank back into his seat. "Miss Graham is the only other I have spoken to about making an acquaintance with the Duke."

Lord Ware nodded slowly, the red fading from his cheeks.

"Then you must consider that she is somehow involved in what occurred."

Refusing to answer, Daniel sank into silence. He did not want to accuse the lady when he had no proof of it, but the truth was that there had to be some suspicion surrounding her. Quite how that was to be addressed when she appeared so reluctant to speak to him of her cousin, Daniel did not know.

"Then what shall we do at present?" he asked, seeing Lord Ware frown again, clearly deep in thought. "If we are to be together in this, then I must know what you expect to do."

Lord Ware shook his head.

"Nothing at present," he stated, firmly. "I will wait for the letter from the Marquess of Stratham before I say anything further."

Considering that this was reasonable, Daniel nodded.

"Then I will continue to pursue my acquaintance with Miss Graham in the interim," he said, glad when Lord Ware did not protest. "And make certain that I am fully recovered."

He winced as he lifted his shoulder, finally able to admit to the pain which still lingered through it.

"Very well," Lord Ware agreed, quietly. "Might I suggest, however, that you are also on your guard?" He rose from his chair and gave Daniel a short bow. "It appears that you may well be in danger, given that there are those who clearly believe that you know more of the Duke than you say."

Daniel nodded and pushed himself to his feet. Together, the two men looked at each other and, much to his relief, there came a small

yet grim smile to Lord Ware's face.

"I must hope to receive Lord Stratham's letter soon, so that we might work together in our search for the Duke," he said, as Daniel nodded. "Forgive me for my brusqueness, but I feel it was quite called for."

Daniel chuckled, holding out his hand which, after a moment, Lord Ware grasped and shook.

"I look forward to our furthered acquaintance," he said, hoping that Lord Ware understood his confidence. "Good day, Lord Ware."

The man nodded.

"Good day."

Chapter Eight

"Viscount Harrogate."

Sarah caught her breath as she heard the announced name of the next dinner guest. Over the last three days, she had found herself torn, wanting to write a note to Lord Harrogate to assure him that she had heard of what had occurred at the ball and praying that he recovered soon – and yet had still not done so for fear that it would seem out of place and even a little inappropriate.

Having heard all of the whispers and rumors about what had occurred, Sarah now knew everything that the *ton* now considered a possibility with respect to who had injured Lord Harrogate in such a way. There had been talk of Lord Sumption doing the deed in retribution for Lord Harrogate's attempt to pull Sarah from him that night of the ball, whilst others believed that it had been a gentleman's quarrel and that he had a young lady whom he was desperately eager to court but was being prevented from doing so by another. Worse still was the belief that Lord Harrogate was being pursued by his late uncle's son – although, the *ton* considered, it must be an illegitimate son – who resented the fact that he could not claim the title and the estate for himself.

Sarah, of course, did not believe any of them to be true. Indeed, she had seen Lord Sumption herself just after she had finished her dance and returned to where she had been standing with Lord Harrogate, which meant that the gentleman had not followed Lord Harrogate out of doors. Neither did she believe that Lord Harrogate had a deep and desperate love for one of the young ladies of the *ton*, given that he had only just come to London recently and, secondly, had very few acquaintances. And finally, she did not for a moment think that there was an illegitimate son who had come in an attempt to claim a title that he could never truly attain. Thus, Sarah found herself quite at a loss as to what had happened that evening and, like the rest of the *ton*, began to wonder when Lord Harrogate would tell them of it. She had not seen him since that night and was a little taken aback by the eagerness that filled her as he stepped into the room. She was even more astonished when her feet began to make their way towards him without her having had any intention of doing so, forcing

her to stop suddenly and turn back towards her mother and her friend.

Thankfully, Miss Crossley was so busy watching Lord Harrogate's entrance that she did not even notice Sarah's attempt to walk closer to him. A glance towards her mother told Sarah that she also had not noticed a thing, leaving Sarah feeling very relieved indeed. A gentle heat brushed her cheeks, but she did not pull her eyes away from Lord Harrogate, watching him closely as he greeted their host, Lord Newton. There were, from what she could see, a few marks still on his face, although she was sure that the bruises were not all from when Lord Sumption had planted him a facer! The second set must have been placed there by whatever foe had attacked him in the gardens at Almack's.

"I had not known that Father had invited Lord Harrogate!" Miss Crossley exclaimed, as Sarah threw her a swift glance, seeing the surprise on her friend's face. "I would have thought he would have informed me of it!"

"I did not know of it either, my dear," Lady Newton said, quietly, as they all watched Lord Harrogate move away. "I am glad that he has done so, however. All of London is talking of what occurred with that poor gentleman and I must say that I find myself quite eager to hear exactly what happened!"

"He may not wish to speak of it," Sarah's mother replied, softly. "We must not press him."

Lady Newton laughed as the room once more began to fill with conversation.

"I am sure that, even if we are discreet and considerate, there will be someone who is not," she answered, sending a quick and pointed glance towards Lady Alcott, who Sarah knew to be something of a gossip. "No doubt she will ask him the most prying questions when we sit down to dinner!"

Sarah did not respond to this remark, finding it most difficult indeed to turn her gaze away from Lord Harrogate. He was now conversing with Lady Alcott herself as well as her daughter – a Miss Sophia Greene – and a strange sense of jealousy rose within Sarah's chest. It was a very odd feeling and Sarah did not much like it, for there was no reason for her to feel anything of the sort given that she had no claim to Lord Harrogate!

And you are to be a little wary of him," she reminded herself, firmly. *He has asked about the Duke on two separate occasions!*

This, of course, might simply be due to the fact that Viscount Harrogate wanted to be acquainted with the Duke of Abernyte so that he could increase his social circle, which many gentlemen were keen to do. Sarah recalled that when her father had asked her outright as to whether or not anyone had asked her specifically about the Duke, she

had remained quite silent and had not even mentioned his name. It was as though she wanted him to be entirely without fault, even though she herself remained a little wary!

Lord Harrogate looked across the room and, in that moment, their eyes met. Heat poured into Sarah's cheeks as she found herself quite unable to look away, caught by the light in his blue eyes. It was as if she were entirely transfixed and it was only when Lord Harrogate was, once more, drawn into conversation by Lady Alcott that Sarah finally found herself freed.

"I *do* hope we will find out all of the particulars!" she heard her mother say, turning back towards her so that she would not be in danger of catching Lord Harrogate's eye again. "Lord Harrogate has proven himself to be quite the gentleman when it came to Sarah's honor in the situation with Lord Sumption, and I am certain that he must have done the same again!"

"I am certain we shall discover it all," Lady Newton said, sounding almost greedy for the information that Lord Harrogate was, she presumed, bound to impart. "And I very much look forward to hearing all that occurred!"

~

"Good evening, Miss Graham."

Sarah was already standing by her chair when Lord Harrogate came to join her. Having the ladies placed first, she had not taken note of who was to sit where, and now, much to her embarrassment, found herself a little overwhelmed by his company.

"It seems that we are to enjoy each other's company this evening, Miss Graham," he continued, when she said nothing. "I do hope that does not trouble you?"

"Trouble me?" Her voice was rather too high pitched for her liking and Sarah winced inwardly with mortification. "No, indeed not."

Lord Harrogate smiled at her, his eyes gentle, and he appeared to be about to say more, only for the indication to be given that they might all take their seats. Ever the gentleman, he waited until she had done so, guiding her chair in towards her a little, before he too sat down. Sarah murmured a greeting to Lord Northwood, who was on her other side, and then awaited the serving of the first course. Baron Northwood spoke one or two words to her, which Sarah managed to return, only for him to then fall into deep conversation with the lady on his other side, which left Sarah all too aware of Lord Harrogate's company.

Her heart was beating so quickly, and with such a loud rhythm, that she not only feared that Lord Harrogate would hear it, but that he

would also realize that his presence was the cause of it. She felt her tongue stick against the roof of her mouth, leaving her all the more uncertain and unsure of what she might say next. Thankfully, it appeared that Lord Harrogate had not quite finished his remarks and thus, he continued speaking to her, although in a much quieter tone than before.

"I confess, Miss Graham, I feared you would be upset – if not angry – at my company here with you this evening."

"Angry?"

The repeated word was spoken quickly as Sarah turned her head sharply, a little surprised to have such an accusation leveled at her. Lord Harrogate smiled at her, however, making her realize that he had not been attempting to upset her.

"Indeed, for I did not come to dance with you, as I ought to have, on the night of Almack's ball," he replied, as she quickly understood what he meant. "There was no explanation given to you either." Seeing her eyes land on the bruises which were now to both sides of his face, Lord Harrogate laughed ruefully. "For the former, I must protest the fact that I could not rise to come and dance with you, and certainly could not even find the words to express to another gentleman to inform you of my plight, for I was quite without my senses at the time! And then, in this last few days, I did not send you an apology, as I should have."

"I do understand, Lord Harrogate," Sarah replied swiftly, not wishing him to take on any unnecessary guilt. "Pray, do not think me at all angry with you, for I assure you I am only concerned for your wellbeing."

Lord Harrogate's smile was soft and yet there was something in his gaze which seemed to hold him back from allowing it to fill his features entirely.

"You are very good, Miss Graham," he murmured, still making quite certain that the rest of the table could not hear him. "But you have every right to hold the latter against me." His smile ran from him as he searched her face, perhaps seeking to discover whether or not she really did not bear any grudge against him. "I ought to have written to you, Miss Graham, to explain my absence at Almack's. I did not do so and for that, I profoundly apologize." Sarah was not quite certain what to say in response to this. It was true that Lord Harrogate might have considered writing a short note to her, but once she had learned what had happened to him, Sarah had considered that he might have been too unwell or in too much pain to have done so. Now, however, it seemed that Lord Harrogate was apologizing for something he *could* have done but had chosen not to, and Sarah was entirely uncertain as to how to respond to such a thing. "I hope that

you will forgive me, Miss Graham," Lord Harrogate finished, leaving her to simply smile back at him rather than respond. "I know that I have not done particularly well in my considerations, and I beg your pardon for that."

Sarah was spared the need to respond at once by the servant setting her first course – a plate of soup – down before her and, after a few moments, everyone began to eat. She found herself struggling to think of what to say to Lord Harrogate, a little surprised at the hurt which now resided within her heart upon realizing that he'd had both the strength and the capacity to have written a short note to her but had chosen not to do so. Had he been contented to leave her in her state of distress and confusion? Or was it more that he had simply believed that she would know of it all, regardless of his note, since the *ton* was filled with gossip about it? Barely tasting the delicious soup that had been set before her, Sarah tried to shake away the strange feeling of upset, reminding herself that there was nothing but a mere acquaintance between herself and Lord Harrogate.

Besides which, she reminded herself firmly, *he may not be all that he appears. Even if you did not wish to tell your father so, Lord Harrogate* has *asked about the Duke on a few occasions!*

As if he had read her mind, Lord Harrogate cleared his throat and turned towards her again.

"Your cousin is not yet returned to London, Miss Graham?" he asked, as she finished the last of her soup.

"No, the Duke has not returned," she answered, a little tightly.

"Might you or your father know when such a thing will take place?" he asked, leaning a little closer to her. "I will admit to being a little overeager in my desire to become acquainted with him, since such an acquaintance would improve my standing a great deal!"

Sarah's jaw tightened for a moment before she replied.

"My father might very well know of the Duke's situation at present, but he has not said so to me," she stated, crisply – even though she was very much aware that her father was uncertain as to the Duke's whereabouts and a little worried about it also. "Although given what has happened to you, Lord Harrogate, I should have thought that his acquaintance was no longer necessary!"

She had spoken with a little more tartness than she had intended and, thus saw the surprised look that Lord Harrogate cast upon her.

"You mean to say that my recent injuries have made me a figure of interest to the *ton*," he said, as Sarah nodded, her cheeks a little hot from embarrassment at her own sharp tongue. She was not quite certain why she had spoken so, but there was such a tumult of emotions going on within her heart that, for the present moment, Sarah struggled to regulate her manner and behavior. Part of her

wanted to turn to Lord Harrogate and ask him directly why he was so very interested in her cousin, whilst another part of felt like stating that she was a trifle upset that he had not thought to write to her to explain his absence at the ball rather than simply expecting her to hear of it from the *ton*, as she had done. And still, her mind continued to wonder why it was that she found herself both so upset and, in addition, so very eager to believe that, despite her fears, Lord Harrogate was nothing but an upright, honorable gentleman who simply wished to acquaint himself with the Duke of Abernyte so that he might improve his standing in society.

"I fear I have upset you."

Sarah was pulled from her thoughts by the voice of Lord Harrogate and, turning to him, saw that he was looking at her with an uncertain look in his eyes. The blue in his eyes appeared to be somewhat stormy and from the way he pressed his lips together every few moments, it appeared as though he were about to ask her another question but was continually forcing himself not to do so.

"Lord Harrogate," she began, taking a steadying breath and wishing silently that she could find some way to express herself clearly when, in truth, she had very little understanding of what it was she was feeling. "Pray, do not trouble yourself."

"But that is no answer at all," he replied, rather quickly. "You see, I can tell that I –"

"*Do* tell us what happened to you at Almack's, Lord Harrogate!"

Lady Alcott's loud, vivacious voice caught both Sarah and Lord Harrogate's attention and they were forced to end their conversation abruptly. Making certain to stitch a look of interest onto her face, Sarah listened with only half an ear as Lady Alcott and the other guests asked Lord Harrogate precisely what had occurred on the night of the Almack's ball. He told them of how he had been taking the air and how he had been suddenly struck and had fallen back, hard.

"Good gracious!" Lady Alcott exclaimed as murmurs of astonishment went around the table. "And you do not know who it was who struck you?"

"No, Lady Alcott, I do not."

Sarah glanced at Lord Harrogate, hearing the truth in his voice, and finding herself a little surprised that she accepted that to be so without question.

"I find that *very* hard to believe," said another guest, looking at Lord Harrogate with narrowed eyes. "You mean to say that you unwittingly walked into an unfortunate situation and were attacked without there being any particular reason for such an incident?"

Lord Harrogate spread his hands and sat back a little in his chair.

"If I knew who it was who had done this," he threw one hand up

towards his face, “then I would, of course, call them out!” One or two of the other guests nodded their fervent agreement. “I profess to you here and now, I have no knowledge at all about who might have done such a thing.”

Something jarred in Sarah’s mind as Lord Harrogate spoke and she frowned, turning her head away from him. The next course had been served and the guests began to eat with relish, whilst still pressing Lord Harrogate for answers, but Sarah remained completely silent and barely touched her food as she thought. What was it about Lord Harrogate’s answers that troubled her so? A question had been asked and he had answered it.

But he did not answer it.

In an instant, the realization came to her. The question had been posed but Lord Harrogate had not answered it at all! *You unwittingly walked into an unfortunate situation and were then attacked without any particular reason?*

Lord Harrogate had not answered that in any way. He had, in fact, avoided the question altogether by stating that, had he known who had attacked him, he would have found a way to express his upset and his frustration at their doing so. Never once had he stated that yes, what had been asked of him was precisely what had occurred.

She had to be certain.

“You mean to say, Lord Harrogate, that you were struck for no apparent reason?” she asked, keeping her tone light whilst her stomach tightened in anxiety. “You have no notion whatsoever as to why such a thing occurred?”

Lord Harrogate threw her a quick glance and then picked up his wine glass, taking a small sip of it before he set it down again. The time he took to do so seemed to drag and Sarah’s breath quickened, as she watched him with sharp eyes and prayed that he would not confirm her suspicions.

“I would have defended myself, had I known such an attack would take place,” he said, with what seemed to be a very light, slightly wry smile. “I do not think I even managed to strike a blow in return! That is most unfortunate, for if I had done so, then I might now be able to tell who it was that was out in the gardens, simply by the bruising to their face!”

“What a pity!” another gentleman exclaimed, having heard Lord Harrogate’s explanation, and leaving Sarah to sit quietly and absorb the answer she had been given.

It was not a pleasant sensation.

Sarah closed her eyes and let out a long breath, her shoulders slumping. There was more to Lord Harrogate than she knew, it seemed. He was not a gentleman who spoke the truth and thus, Sarah

had to admit that it seemed now that he might well be asking about the Duke of Abernyte for his own reasons rather than simply seeking to make an excellent acquaintance and improve his social standing. Whatever had happened that night at Almack's, Lord Harrogate clearly did not wish to tell the whole truth of the matter and, she considered, that might also have been why she had received no note from him.

Then he has been showing an interest in your company for his own gains, the quiet voice in her head said, frankly. *You have been taken in by him.*

"Miss Graham?"

She turned and saw Lord Harrogate looking back at her with a small, warm smile. The smile struck a hard blow to Sarah's heart, and she did not hold his gaze for long.

"You are still upset with me, it seems," he continued, when she did not speak to him. "Might I once more beg your forgiveness? Or might you tell me what it is you require of me in order to mend what has been damaged?"

"The truth, Lord Harrogate."

Her eyes blazed with fire as she looked back at him, finding her heart's eagerness to demand honesty from him preventing her from acting with any decorum. Lifting her chin, she waited for him to respond to her challenge, watching his expression closely. Lord Harrogate did not react for a moment, his eyes widening just a little as he looked back into her defiant face.

"I do not know what you mean, Miss Graham," he said, softly, but Sarah shook her head, her hands clenching hard into fists as she held them under the table so that no other might see.

"I believe you do, Lord Harrogate," she said, her voice still low, but with a harshness to it that could not be hidden. "I do not believe that you have spoken the truth about the night at Almack's. I do not think that you are eager to be introduced to my cousin simply to further your own social standing. In short, Lord Harrogate, it seems to me that you are a gentleman with secrets who appears to be quite content in using me ill."

Lord Harrogate's mouth opened and closed again and, as he swallowed hard, his gaze turned away from her. Sarah's heart fell to the floor on seeing his reaction, realizing now that he was as she had thought him: a dishonest man.

"I admire you greatly, Miss Graham." His words were softly spoken but they did not do anything to aid Sarah's wounded heart. "I am not speaking the truth about the night at Almack's for fear that –"

"I do not wish nor need to hear your explanations, Lord Harrogate." Sarah interrupted, a little curtly. "Whilst I will always be

very grateful to you for your attempt at assisting me with Lord Sumption, I do not think there is any need to continue our acquaintance." She glanced at him and was a little surprised to see the shock that was now rippling across his features. His face was a little paler than before, his blue eyes wide and filled with astonishment. Clearly, he had not expected to hear such a thing from her.

"Miss Graham, if you would allow me a few minutes in private conversation, I might –"

"And how is your father, Miss Graham?"

Relieved at being so interrupted, Sarah turned to Lord Northwood and began to speak with him without hesitation, ignoring Lord Harrogate's request entirely. Her heart ached and yet she felt determined. She would not permit him to be in her acquaintance any longer. She would not allow him to continue to deceive her, wishing only for her company so that he might come to know the Duke of Abernyte. Quite what his reasons for doing so were, she did not know, but Sarah determined that she would speak to her father about the matter just as soon as she could. Lord Blackwell might be a little frustrated with her for not mentioning Lord Harrogate's interest before now, but that was something she would have to face.

The connection between herself and Lord Harrogate was now entirely severed. There would be no ongoing acquaintance, no further dancing or conversation. Lord Harrogate could continue his endeavors elsewhere, but she would no longer be a part of his social circle.

Sarah only wished it did not pain her so much to think of it, but as she continued to converse and smile with Lord Northwood, she forced herself to ignore such feelings. It was for the best, she told herself, and she would very soon recover. Lord Harrogate had to become very little to her now. Their acquaintance was at its end.

Chapter Nine

"I must speak with you."

Daniel grimaced, frustrated at being interrupted, only for it to die away at once as he saw the Earl of Ware standing by him.

"Lord Ware," he murmured, permitting himself to be distracted from watching for Miss Graham. "Good evening."

Lord Ware gave him a small, halfhearted smile.

"Good evening, Lord Harrogate," he said, with forced politeness. "Might I trouble you for a few moments?"

Daniel tipped his head, studying the man.

"You have received word from the Marquess of Stratham," he said, seeing Lord Ware nod.

Relief rushed through him, and he let out a long, heavy sigh which seemed to come from his very core. It was as if he had been holding his breath for some days, waiting until Lord Ware heard from the Marquess so that he might finally be free of any hint of wrongdoing.

"You are to be trusted, it seems," Lord Ware remarked, although there was no broad smile nor hint of happiness at such news. "I would apologize for my doubts but, given that you had much the same about myself also, I do not feel a particular burden to do so."

At this, Daniel let out a bark of laughter which, finally, brought a smile to Lord Ware's face.

"I am very glad to hear it," he said, as Lord Ware pulled out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Daniel. "Then we are together in this?"

"We are."

Handing the Marquess' letter to Daniel, Lord Ware waited quietly as Daniel read it. The letter itself was brief, stating that Daniel had been tasked with finding the Duke of Abernyte in order to deliver a note that the Marquess himself had written. He had also stated that Daniel was to be trusted and made the suggestion that they might work together, alongside the Duke of Abernyte. The letter was finished with the statement that the Marquess appreciated all that the Earl of Ware was doing in making sure that the danger from the possible French invasion was countered. He pressed him to continue being vigilant and ended with the usual wishes for his health and his

family. Daniel folded up the letter and returned it, looking at the Earl of Ware with fresh eyes.

"Lord Stratham does not realize that the letter has not been delivered," Daniel said, lifting his head to see Lord Ware nod. "That is why he has tasked us with working alongside the Duke in whatever endeavors he is involved in at present." He waited until Lord Ware looked back at him before he spoke again. "Might I ask for your support in this matter, Lord Ware?" he said, the noise of the ballroom almost stealing his words before they reached Lord Ware's ears. "Neither of us, it seems, are working in support of the French!"

Lord Ware chuckled and all of the fragments of remaining tension fled.

"Indeed, we are not," he agreed. "I am very glad of that fact, I will admit. Yes, I would be glad to help you." His smile dulled just a little. "As I have said previously, I am growing concerned as to the Duke's whereabouts."

"As am I."

Just as he spoke, Daniel caught sight of Miss Graham as she entered the ballroom. His feet seemed to move of their own accord as he walked forward, only to stop sharply as he realized what he was doing.

"Ah, Miss Graham is still in your sights, I see!" Lord Ware exclaimed, slapping Daniel on the back as though they were old friends. "You have been doing what you can to form a strong acquaintance with her?"

Daniel shook his head.

"I am afraid I have been doing quite the opposite," he said, unable to drag his eyes away from her. "Two nights ago, we were both invited to a dinner party, and I was very fortunate indeed to be seated next to her." Seeing Miss Graham swallowed up by the crowd of guests, Daniel sighed heavily and shook his head, passing one hand over his eyes. "I am afraid that she is quite determined to put our acquaintance to an end."

Lord Ware's smile fell to the floor.

"Oh?"

Daniel nodded ruefully, a little surprised with just how upset he had been at Miss Graham's decision.

"We spoke and there appeared to be something in what I said which has convinced her that I do not tell the truth," he said, wincing. "Of course, she is quite correct, for I have not told her my reason for wishing to find and become acquainted with the Duke, and neither did I tell her everything about the night at Almack's, when I was attacked."

"And you believe that she is aware of this deception?"

Again, Daniel winced, realizing the true nature of what he had been doing.

"I do not think that she knows why I have kept the truth from her, but I am certain that she is sure that I have not been honest," he said, heavily. "I asked her again if the Duke would be returning to London soon, but she said she did not know. I asked if her father might be aware of it, and she said that he might well know but would not have told her of it even if he had." Grimacing, Daniel once more tried to find Miss Graham in the crowd but could not see even the smallest glimpse of her. "I am not at all certain what I should do now, given that she does not want me in her company."

"Mayhap you should tell her the truth."

It was a startling suggestion and Daniel spun his head back towards Lord Ware, confused.

"When we last spoke, Harrogate, there was the suggestion made that Miss Graham might well have been the one to inform your attacker that you had, yet again, been seeking the Duke of Abernyte," Lord Ware continued, before Daniel could even speak. "I am well aware that it may be so still, but surely the only way to discover that, one way or the other, is to speak directly to the lady and ask her outright."

Daniel did not know what to think. He would never have expected Lord Ware to have suggested such a thing but, the more he considered it, the more Daniel realized that it might be the very thing to do.

"Besides," Lord Ware continued, a little quirk playing about his mouth, "I think that you would be less than delighted should your acquaintance with Miss Graham come to such a disappointing end."

Lifting one eyebrow, Daniel chose not to ask what Lord Ware meant by such a remark, knowing full well what it implied. He could not deny it either, for as much as he wanted to know what Miss Graham knew about the Duke, his heart was beginning to feel a little more than just a friendly consideration for the lady. She was beautiful, certainly, but he had enjoyed their conversations and indeed, found himself looking forward to being with her whenever he could. What made things even more confusing was that he was now rather troubled that she did not wish to continue with their acquaintance any longer. Had he cared less for her, he might have felt only frustration that the possibility of finding out more about the Duke from her had now disappeared, but instead, there was a deep upset and even a sadness in his heart over the severing of their connection.

"She may be just as innocent as you in all of this, Lord Harrogate," Lord Ware finished, as Daniel sighed heavily and looked away. "I considered you a possible enemy, only to be proven entirely wrong." He lifted one shoulder. "What if you find the same? It would not be

worth the pain and the sorrow to continue in this manner if you can spare yourself all of that by merely having a conversation!"

Daniel hesitated, only to nod slowly. Perhaps Lord Ware was correct.

"We are, I fear, now in a state of urgency when it comes to finding the Duke," he said, as Lord Ware nodded fervently. "The letter I have to give him has not yet been delivered and you are rather worried about the situation."

"I am," Lord Ware agreed. "Might I suggest, then, that you speak to Miss Graham as soon as possible? We do not have time to wait." His smile was rueful. "We have already wasted time trying to ascertain whether or not one or both of us can be trusted!"

It took a moment for Daniel to respond but, when he did, it was with more determination than before.

"Yes, of course," he said, lifting his chin and setting his shoulders straight. "I will go in search of her and beg for a few words in private."

"Quite how you will get her to agree, I cannot imagine," Lord Ware replied, grinning in a less than encouraging manner. "But I wish you the very best."

Daniel did not reply. His thoughts were turned solely towards Miss Graham. Stepping away from Lord Ware and towards where he had last seen the lady, he made his way through the crowd, determined to find her. His heart beat a little more quickly as a new purpose filled it. Lord Ware was quite correct, Daniel *had* to find her. He had to explain, had to ask her what she knew and had to pray that she was not in any way involved with the enemy. Would she trust him with her truths? And might there be a way for them to find a connection once more?

~

"Miss Graham."

Daniel stepped a little out of the shadows and, bold in his actions, took Miss Graham's hand. The startled gasp that flew from her lips was entirely expected and, as she turned around to look at him, he saw the fear which flew into her wide green eyes.

"Please," he said, speaking in a low tone and praying silently that she would not scream or give sound to her fright. "I *must* speak with you. It is a matter of urgency."

Miss Graham had been standing with a small group of ladies and gentlemen and, whilst in sight of her mother, was not too close to her. Daniel could see her hesitate, could see her studying him and waited with bated breath for her to respond.

“I do not wish to converse with you at present.”

“I know you do not, and you have every right to be angry with me for my lack of honesty, Miss Graham,” Daniel stated, still keeping hold of her hand although, had she made any attempt to pull it back, he would have released her at once. “I will not deny that I have not told you everything, but that is for good cause.”

Miss Graham lifted her head just a little, studying him with careful eyes. There was no fear there any longer, which Daniel was very grateful for, but still she had not agreed to what he asked.

“I will explain it all to you, Miss Graham, I promise,” he finished. “I only ask that you will be as honest with me also.”

“I do not think I have ever been dishonest, Lord Harrogate!”

Sighing inwardly, Daniel took a long breath and looked deeply into her eyes.

“I will admit that *I* have been so,” he answered, quietly. “But mayhap, once I explain, you will understand why.”

There was still a niggling doubt in his mind that perhaps Miss Graham was, in some way, involved in the attack which had taken place on the night of the ball at Almack’s and that, mayhap, she was also doing whatever she could to keep the Duke’s whereabouts a secret for the Duke’s ill, but as he looked into her face, Daniel found those doubts beginning to fade. Yes, she had not been as open with him as he had hoped and certainly, she was not speaking of the Duke in as receptive a manner as he might have expected, but regardless, there was something about her which told him that she could be trusted.

“Lord Harrogate.” Miss Graham looked down at their joined hands and then turned her head to where the other gentlemen and ladies spoke – clearly aware that none of them had as yet missed her presence, such was the depth of their conversation.

“It will only be for a few minutes, Miss Graham,” Daniel said, seeing her hesitation and finding himself almost desperate to speak with her. “Should you wish it, you can then remove yourself from my company entirely and I will not come to trouble you again.”

Miss Graham licked her lips, and her eyes once more returned to his but, after a few moments, she relented.

“Very well, Lord Harrogate,” she answered, although no smile came to her lips. “But I cannot be more than a few minutes. My mother, in particular, will be searching for me.”

“Let us step this way,” he answered, trying to keep the eagerness from his voice as relief that she had agreed to their conversation began to flood his heart. “I mean you no ill will, Miss Graham,” he added, suddenly afraid that she might think him eager to pull her into the darkness that cloaked the back of the ballroom for his own, more

nefarious reasons. “It is only a little further away.”

Again, Miss Graham hesitated, and Daniel was just about to let go of her hand, only for her to grasp his hand a little more tightly and then step out after him. Drawing in a deep breath, Daniel walked only five steps forward, so that they were directly next to the wall. No-one would overhear him now and Miss Graham could still see both her mother and her friends. He was glad that Lady Blackwell appeared to be having quite an animated conversation, for she did not glance over to where her daughter ought to be or appear to even be recalling that she was there!

“Yes, Lord Harrogate?”

Miss Graham gently pulled her hand from his and placed both of her hands together in front of her. Tilting her head, she looked at him steadily, her face half-hidden in shadow. Daniel swallowed hard, a little surprised at the strength of feeling that now held him sway. There was, unfortunately, an awareness of just how alone they were at present, despite the fact that they stood in a room full of other guests. The desire to take her hand in his once more began to flicker into life but Daniel pushed it away just as quickly as he could. He had to think only of what he wished to impart.

“Miss Graham,” he said, softly, seeing how her eyes were fixed to his own, clearly unwilling to miss even a syllable of what he said. “You have found me out.”

Miss Graham blinked rapidly but did not say anything in response, although her eyes narrowed just a little as she continued to study him.

“I have had other intentions when it has come to the Duke of Abernyte,” Daniel confessed. “In addition, I have not told you the truth about the night at Almack’s.” A sad smile pulled at his mouth. “I have not told anyone save Lord Ware the truth about what occurred.”

“I see.” Miss Graham’s eyes were no longer narrowed, but instead were a little wide. She had not expected him to be so honest with her, it seemed, nor to admit to all that she had suspected. “And why have you not told me the truth, Lord Harrogate?” she asked, moving only a tiny step backwards but enough to make Daniel realize that she was a little afraid of the answer. “Why are you seeking my cousin?”

He did not hesitate to answer, wanting to remove any sort of fear from her heart.

“I have done so simply to protect the Duke,” he replied, quickly. “I was involved in battle, as you are aware, but was forced to return to England due to both injury and responsibility. However, before I left, I was tasked with taking a letter to the Duke and making certain that he received it, and that none but I knew of the note’s existence.” Shaking his head, he let out a small, exasperated sound. “Unfortunately, I have been unable to find the Duke here in London, even though I was

assured that he would be here for the Season." His eyes slid back towards Miss Graham, his heart beating a little more quickly as he felt himself longing for her to respond in a way that was both understanding and forgiving. "Thus, I have sought him out in any way that I can, for I am entirely uncertain as to what else to do! He is not at his estate, he is not in London, and, for all my attempts, I cannot discover him!" Miss Graham said nothing for some minutes. Her lips pressed together tightly, and she looked at Daniel as though assessing whether or not he could be believed to be trustworthy. Daniel's heart cried out for her to do so, for her to allow him to step closer and explain all the more, should she wish it of him – but still, she said nothing. Growing anxious, Daniel found himself speaking again, even though he had not intended to do so. "I have asked you about the Duke so that I might find him and fulfill my duties," he continued, speaking a little more quickly now. "The night at Almack's, I was attacked by someone who was asking whether or not *I* knew where the Duke was at present!"

This seemed to send something of a shock through Miss Graham, for she started visibly, and her eyes widened. In the next moment, her hand had reached out and grasped his sleeve, clinging to him tightly.

"What did you say, Lord Harrogate?"

Daniel, seeing her fear, placed his free hand on top of hers.

"Miss Graham, I said nothing," he answered, calmly. "I spoke the truth, but the gentleman – or gentlemen, for there may have been two – did not tell me their reasons for asking such a thing! The one who spoke insisted that I knew the Duke of Abernyte, told me that I *must* be acquainted with him, since we were both at war." A harsh laugh escaped him for a moment as a wry smile twisted his lips. "That gentleman clearly has very little understanding of what it is to be at war, nor the sheer number of men involved in any one particular endeavor."

Miss Graham swallowed hard and then, much to Daniel's surprise, came closer to him. He was astonished to see her wide eyes and to feel the slight tremble which had come over her frame, his hand now going to her arm so that he might comfort her in whatever way he could. Instantly, he realized precisely what it was that Miss Graham was afraid of, why she had been so wary of him, and he cursed his own foolishness.

"You believed that I wished to bring harm to the Duke," he said slowly, seeing her nod. "How is it that you have heard of such things, Miss Graham?" He could not understand how a simple young lady of the *ton* would know that there were those amongst the London set who were attempting to assist the enemy. "The Duke has spoken to you of such things, perhaps?"

Miss Graham's eyes fluttered closed for a moment as she let out a ragged breath. Her shoulders dropped slightly, as though she were finally able to be at ease in his presence, and it took her another few moments before she was able to speak.

"My father has been involved in the war effort for some time," she said, making Daniel's eyes widen in surprise. "He does not do a great deal now, for he has many responsibilities – of which I am one." Her eyes opened and she looked up into Daniel's face, her voice a little hoarse and yet with a great calmness within her expression. "My mother is not at all inclined to speak of such things, Lord Harrogate," she continued, her hand still tight on his sleeve. "Whereas I confess that I am very much inclined to know of all that is taking place outside of England's shores. Thus, my father has been glad to talk to me of what he is involved in, on condition that I hold all such matters close and, given that the Duke is not only my cousin but also at work with the war effort, he and my father have had many a conversation in my presence."

"They must both know that they can trust you implicitly," Daniel answered, seeing the small smile that lifted the corners of Miss Graham's mouth.

"I have always promised never to speak a word of what I know, and thus far, I have never done so," she replied, lifting her chin just a little.

"Then why do you do so now?" he asked, a little confused. "I might very well be playing a ruse."

She shook her head.

"You mentioned the Earl of Ware," she replied, quietly. "I know that my cousin thinks very highly of him, even though they are not particularly well acquainted."

Daniel felt heat pour into his cheeks and he looked away for a moment, trying to compose himself.

"Lord Ware knows I am trustworthy now," he answered eventually, not wanting to tell her all that had taken place to prove him so. "Thus, you believe what I am saying, Miss Graham? You trust that I am not attempting to seek out the Duke of Abernyte in order to bring him injury?"

She said nothing for a moment or two but instead just looked up into his face. Daniel's heart began to slam hard against his chest but when she smiled, the fear that she would still reject him instantly began to fade.

"I do, Lord Harrogate," she replied, quietly. "I believe I understand you entirely."

Wincing, Daniel laughed a little ruefully.

"I fear that you will hold it against me when I tell you that I

suspected *you* might have been involved in the attack that took place at Almack's," he said, wanting to make certain that she understood everything so that he did not hold anything back from her. "For all I knew, you might have been involved in the situation to bring the Duke as much difficulty as you could."

This did not seem to offend Miss Graham, for she merely nodded and shrugged one shoulder. Daniel laughed again, feeling relief course through his veins. There was now an understanding between himself and Miss Graham and that brought him great contentment. She no longer suspected him and, finally, he knew he could trust her also.

"That does not answer the question as to where the Duke is at present, however."

Daniel nodded, seeing the concern grow in Miss Graham's expression.

"You say that your father and the Duke often spoke?" he asked, seeing her nod. "Then does he have any idea as to where the Duke might be now?"

"None – and I know he is concerned for him," Miss Graham answered, quickly. "Mayhap you would wish to speak with him? Both yourself, and Lord Ware?"

It was an excellent suggestion and Daniel accepted it at once, growing all too aware of how they now stood. Her hand was still on his sleeve, with his hand resting gently on her arm. Heat was beginning to spread upward within him from his very core as he looked down into her eyes. Now that they had resolved their difficulties and had decided to trust each other, there was a fresh openness and warmth between them which Daniel could not deny. Finally, he could admit that he found Miss Graham to be quite beautiful and that, throughout their acquaintance thus far – short though it had been, he had found her utterly delightful. Trusting her meant that he did not have to hold himself back from what he felt and, much to his astonishment, the desire to pull her close grew within him with such force that it was almost too much to withstand.

"Lord Harrogate." Miss Graham's voice was barely loud enough for him to hear, and Daniel could only hope that she too was feeling even a fraction of what was coursing through him at present. "I feel that I –"

"I am certain that I was to dance with Miss Graham!"

A loud voice of one of the gentlemen who stood near to them interrupted whatever it was Miss Graham was intending to say, bringing their conversation – and their closeness - to a sudden, abrupt end. Miss Graham, her cheeks now deeply flushed, threw Daniel a quick, uncertain smile before stepping away. Daniel cleared his throat but remained precisely where he was, not wanting to bring any

unwarranted attention to his position for fear that a whisper might begin about either himself or Miss Graham. And yet, stepping back a fraction farther into the shadows, Daniel allowed a small smile to spread across his lips. Lord Ware had given excellent advice, it seemed, for now there was a peace between himself and Miss Graham. Quite what would come of it, Daniel was not yet certain but, at the very least, this was an excellent beginning.

All I need to do now is find the Duke and this season will have gone very well indeed, he thought to himself, before turning around and making his way quietly through the ballroom once more.

Chapter Ten

"You are thinking of someone in particular."

Sarah started visibly, turning her head to see her cousin lifting one eyebrow at her as she stood, framed in the doorway.

"Florence," she said hastily, her voice rasping a little with embarrassment. "Good afternoon."

She smiled as warmly as she could, far too aware that her cheeks were hot and her mind still very full of Lord Harrogate.

"Good afternoon," her cousin replied, a twinkle in her eyes as she came to sit down opposite Sarah. "You have not yet told me who it is that sent such a warm smile to your face!"

Tilting her head, Florence waited for Sarah to speak but Sarah merely shook her head. She had absolutely no intention of saying anything to Florence, given that her cousin was much inclined towards gossip. Besides which, she considered, Sarah herself had very little idea of what Lord Harrogate meant to her at present, for she was filled with a turmoil of emotions when it came to the gentleman.

"Let me ring for tea."

Rising to her feet, Sarah pulled the bell and then sat back down, waiting for the maid to bring the tea tray. Their mothers would be taking tea in the larger parlor, leaving Sarah and Florence to talk together.

"Was it Lord Darlington?"

Sighing inwardly, Sarah forced a smile to her face.

"No, it was not," she said, quickly. "There is no gentleman in particular, I assure you."

This did not remove the knowing look from Florence's expression, however.

"Are you quite certain?"

"I am."

Sarah quickly asked Florence whether or not she had enjoyed the ball and which gentlemen she had danced with. Much to her relief, Florence immediately began talking about everything she had done and who she had enjoyed conversing with, leaving Sarah to simply smile and nod on occasion. After a moment, Sarah's mind began, once more, to drift back towards Lord Harrogate and all that they had

spoken of last evening. When he had first requested to converse with her, she had not been certain whether or not she ought to speak to him, but Sarah was now glad that she had taken the chance. Lord Harrogate, it seemed, was just as trustworthy and as respectful as she might have hoped – and the fact that he was working alongside Lord Ware meant that Sarah had no doubt whatsoever that what he had told her was quite true. She was only sorry that she had not yet been able to assist him when it came to the Duke of Abernyte, as she had heard nothing of his whereabouts. Even her father, it seemed, was quite in the dark and concerned about the state of things, which did leave Sarah feeling a little perturbed.

You wished for him to linger.

The quiet murmur in her mind brought a fresh flush of heat into Sarah's cheeks and she shot a glance towards her cousin, but Florence was still in raptures over a dance she had enjoyed with one Lord Huddersfield. Praying that her face would soon lose its color, she tried once more to listen to her cousin so that she would not continue to think on all that she had felt when Lord Harrogate had been so near to her – but her mind simply refused to permit her to do so.

Yes, she admitted silently to herself. *Yes, I did very much want him to linger.* Quite why she had wanted such a thing, Sarah was not certain beyond the fact that she felt a desire to have Lord Harrogate close to her so that he might speak *only* to her, might look *only* at her. There had been something in his expression which had sent her heart into raptures, although she still could not quite place what it had been. An affection, mayhap? The way he had smiled at her, the way he had gazed down into her face had sent all manner of emotion flooding her heart, and Sarah had been almost entirely overcome by what she had felt. It was as though the barriers she had drawn up around her heart had now all been removed in one quick moment, leaving her entirely unguarded. But Lord Harrogate had done nothing untoward and, indeed, had not attempted to draw closer to her, even though there had been opportunity to do so. His head had not lowered, he had not pulled her a little closer – in fact, he had done nothing other than simply gaze down at her as though he too were a little surprised with all that he was now feeling.

"You are thinking of him again!" The loud, vivacious voice of Florence cut through Sarah's contemplation sharply and she snapped her head back towards her cousin, seeing the broad grin that had now settled on Florence's face. "You will not tell me who it is, then?" Florence continued in a sing-song voice, clearly quite certain that Sarah was thinking of one particular gentleman. "I am a little disappointed, I confess, but I am certain I will be able to guess!"

"Florence," Sarah replied hastily, not wanting such a game to be

played. “There is no need for you to do so. The truth is,” she continued, hating that she would have to lie but desperate for her cousin not to know anything about Lord Harrogate, “I have been thinking very much about my cousin.”

At this remark, Florence’s smile slipped, and her eyes widened – and Sarah felt a gentle swell of relief within her heart.

“The Duke is, as you know, still absent from town,” she continued, before Florence could interject. “There are a great many young ladies wishing to seek out his company, and they continue to come to me to ask whether or not I am aware of where he has gone!”

“Oh, but of course!” Florence exclaimed, sounding a little breathless. “You know that I am also very eager to know when the Duke might grace us with his presence once more!”

Sarah allowed herself a small, indulgent smile.

“And should I hear of his imminent return, I will, of course, make you amongst the first that I inform,” she replied, as Florence let out a sigh. “All of the *ton* are missing him, I am quite certain of it.”

“Oh, indeed!” Florence exclaimed, just as the maid brought in the tea tray. “In fact, I had a particular gentleman asking me only last evening whether or not I knew if the Duke of Abernyte was to return to London soon!”

A small frown began to spread across Sarah’s brow.

“A gentleman?” she asked, as the maid set the tray down before quickly hurrying from the room. “Why was he asking such a thing?”

Florence shrugged and, instead of waiting for Sarah to pour the tea as she ought, simply sat forward and began to help herself.

“Yes, he was simply conversing,” she said, with a small shrug. “He knew that I was cousin to you and that you, in turn, were cousin to the Duke.” Sitting back with her cup and saucer held rather delicately in her right hand, she tipped her head and lifted one eyebrow. “It will be very good for my standing, should I be able to inform the *ton* of the Duke’s return to society,” she finished, her tone now almost wheedling. “I do hope that I will be the *first* that you tell.”

Sarah barely paid attention to anything that her cousin was saying, her anxiety once more beginning to rise. Her father had asked her expressly whether anyone had been enquiring about the Duke’s presence here in London and, whilst she ought to have told him about Lord Harrogate at once, she had not thought of anyone else to speak of. However, she realized, those who were eager for the Duke’s return to London might, in fact, seek to find out about his present whereabouts through different means. They might, for example, ask Florence about what she had heard or what she might know, rather than asking Sarah herself outright.

“This gentleman,” she said quickly, interrupting Florence’s

conversation, “what was his name?”

Florence went to answer, only to close her mouth and shake her head.

“Florence,” Sarah said, a little more firmly. “I must know.”

Her hands clenched tightly into fists as she forced herself to remain patiently waiting. Her cousin was, for whatever reason, deciding to keep such knowledge to herself.

“I will not state his name,” Florence told her, stoutly, turning her head away. “You seek to know only so that you might go to him and tell him personally, should the Duke return!”

It was all Sarah could do to keep from exclaiming aloud in frustration.

“No, I do not wish to do such a thing,” she answered, as quietly as she could. “I am only interested to know which gentleman has been asking you about His Grace.” She tried to shrug one shoulder and to appear as nonchalant as she could but was quite certain she failed entirely. “I like to know which gentlemen and ladies are particularly eager for his return so that I might inform him of it when he finally makes his way back to London.”

This did not capture Florence’s imagination and nor did she seem to believe it, for she kept her head turned away and, instead of making any sort of sound of agreement or consent, merely lifted her chin a little more, as though to state that she was not at all to be persuaded.

Sarah closed her eyes and let out a long breath, trying desperately to keep her composure. She wanted to exclaim that Florence was being quite ridiculous and that, in keeping such a thing from her, might, in fact, be bringing the Duke more difficulty than aid but, of course, sense told her that she could not. Instead of saying anything at all, instead of making any sort of explanation, Sarah was forced simply to sit back in her chair and glare angrily at her cousin for a few moments. This, however, had no impact upon Florence at all for, when she finally turned her head back towards Sarah, it was with such a delighted, confident, and victorious smile that it was all Sarah could do to remain in the room.

“I will make a suggestion, Sarah,” Florence said, as Sarah forced herself to reach for the tea tray and pour herself a small cup. “You are clearly so very eager to find out the name of the gentleman that spoke with me, I am certain that you will not refuse this one little request.”

Sarah said nothing, her lips clamped closed as she sat back in her seat. A small gleam had come into Florence’s eyes and Sarah did not like the appearance of it at all.

“I will tell you the name of the gentleman I spoke with,” Florence continued, once she was sure of Sarah’s full attention, “*only* if you tell

me truthfully the name of the gentleman that you have so clearly been thinking of."

One eyebrow lifted as Sarah's stomach tightened, then began to twist in a most uncomfortable fashion.

"I have told you," Sarah protested, a little weakly, "there is no gentleman."

Florence laughed and shook her head, her tea sloshing in the teacup as she did so.

"I am not a fool, not easily taken in, cousin," she stated, although with a little more ferocity to her tone than Sarah had expected. "I am not about to believe you, simply because you say it is so! I have, I am sure, had that very same look and very same softness about my features when it came to the gentlemen that I myself was considering." She laughed at Sarah's discomfort, obviously quite certain that she was correct. "Although I do admit that I will very often think of one gentleman and then the next, whereas you have never had such a look about you before." Grinning, she leaned forward in her chair, fixing Sarah with a hard look. "Which is why I am quite certain there is a gentleman on your mind, and I look forward to the day that you admit to me his name."

Sarah was torn. She might easily give Florence the name of any gentleman in the hope that her cousin would then go on to tell Sarah the truth about who she had been speaking to, but there was a difficulty there. Given that Florence was very inclined towards gossip and whisper, Sarah had no doubt that anything she said to her cousin would be spoken of by her to many others – and that was the last thing she needed at this present juncture! Even if Florence vowed that she would not speak a word, Sarah had no confidence that she would be able to keep to such a vow. Thus, she found herself sitting quietly, her shoulders slumping as she realized precisely just how well her cousin had secured the situation.

"Florence, please."

She spoke as calmly and yet with firmness in her voice, but her cousin remained entirely unconvinced.

"When you are willing to tell me all, then I shall be very glad indeed to give you the name of the gentleman," she said, primly. Her eyes sparkled with pleasure at her own wit, leaving Sarah to close her eyes in both defeat and frustration. "Until then, I will be quite silent."

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"YOU ARE to have two gentlemen calling together?"

Sarah smiled up at her mother as she stood by the fireplace, looking back at Sarah with a shrewd gaze.

“Yes, Mama,” Sarah explained, as quickly as she could. “Lord Harrogate and Lord Ware wish to call on me together.” She lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. “They are both very good friends, I suppose.”

“Still,” Lady Blackwell murmured, turning her gaze away from her daughter for a few moments, “that is a very strange thing indeed. If they both wish to pursue you, then they ought to call separately.”

Sarah laughed and shook her head, praying that this hid her warm face.

“Mama, they may not wish to court me at all!” she exclaimed, ignoring the way her heart began to yearn for that very thing to come from Lord Harrogate. “They are merely paying a visit. After all, I have danced and conversed with them both and think them both excellent gentlemen.” Lady Blackwell nodded slowly, her expression still one of confusion. “And Father will be at home this afternoon?”

Nodding, Lady Blackwell sighed and made her way to the sofa, so that she might sit down and rest before the callers began to arrive.

“He will be, certainly,” she agreed, as Sarah let out a small breath of relief. “He is out at present, although I am not quite certain where he has gone to.” She smiled at Sarah, her confusion now quite gone from her. “Your father is always going about town on business and the like, but he never wishes to join us at a ball or a soiree!”

“No, he does not,” Sarah replied, laughing. She knew very well that her father was not inclined to involve himself in society, seeing it to be less than worthwhile to do so. Yes, he was very eager for Sarah to marry and for her to marry well, but he did not need to attend balls with her or go with her to an evening’s entertainment. On occasion, he might join them at the theatre or attend a dinner party but, aside from that, Lord Blackwell was much inclined towards his own company, apart from the occasional card party. Indeed, try as she might, Sarah had not been able to have an audience with him these last two days! She had wanted to explain all that Lord Harrogate had told her and to inform her father that both he and Lord Ware wished to speak with him directly, but as yet, had not been able to do so. Lord Blackwell had been always much too busy to give her even a few minutes of conversation and Sarah had not wanted to interrupt him either. There was a heaviness about him which she could practically feel whenever she stepped into the study where he worked. Not wanting to ask what it was in the brought that heaviness to him, Sarah had contented herself to praying about the matter and asking only whether or not her father intended to be at home this very afternoon. Lord Blackwell had looked up, nodded, frowned, and then dropped his head again so that he might look at the various papers which now abounded on his desk.

“I do think that Lord Ware would be the one to consider, my dear.”

Sarah started, having been lost in her own thoughts.

“I beg your pardon, Mama?”

“Lord Harrogate is only a Viscount, whereas Lord Ware is an Earl!” Lady Blackwell exclaimed, leaning forward in her chair, and pinning Sarah with her excited gaze. “He, certainly, would be the gentleman to consider out of the two!”

Letting out a slow breath so that she might be measured in her response, Sarah gave her mother a small smile.

“Mama,” she replied softly, “I have no need to consider such a thing, surely?”

“But they are both to call on you!” her mother replied, throwing up her hands. “If one is an Earl and one a Viscount, then the decision seems quite apparent!”

“Not if I consider the gentlemen’s characters,” Sarah responded, quickly. “An Earl has an excellent title, certainly, but that does not mean that he is at all wonderful.” She smiled softly at her mother, who had sunk back into her chair a little more. “Besides which, I must consider my heart.”

At this remark, Lady Blackwell’s expression changed entirely. She went from being a trifle despondent to being greatly interested. Her eyes widened and she sat forward on the edge of her seat, one hand reaching out towards Sarah.

“You mean to say that there is a gentleman whom you are considering?”

“No, Mama,” Sarah replied, quickly, shaking her head. “It is only to state that, if such a thing should come to be, I must consider what I feel. After all, I should not like to marry a gentleman with a lofty title who will do nothing but treat me ill!”

Lady Blackwell nodded slowly, biting her lip for a few moments.

“No, indeed,” she answered eventually, sinking back against the cushions, and nodding to herself as though to make quite clear in her own mind what Sarah was saying. “That is very wise indeed. I should not wish you to have any disappointment in the match.”

Sarah opened her mouth to say more, only for the door to be suddenly flung open. It crashed hard against the wall and made both Sarah and Lady Blackwell jump in surprise, only for their eyes to land on a footman who had hurried into the room. His usual jacket was gone from him and, much to Sarah’s horror, she could see red stains on his white shirt.

“It is the master,” he exclaimed, his voice loud and desperate and seeming to fill the room. “My Lady, if you would come….” He trailed off, gesturing to the door, and waiting for Lady Blackwell to get to her feet.

Sarah could not move. Her eyes were fixed on the red stains on the footman's shirt, her heart hammering furiously. Her mouth was dry and the air around her seemed to crackle with tension, leaving her barely able to think of what she ought to do next.

"My Lady!" The footman came forward, speaking to Lady Blackwell in urgent tones. "He wishes to see you. He was asking for you as he was brought into the house."

"Brought in?"

Sarah's rasping voice did not seem to reach the footman's ears for, much to Sarah's astonishment, he grasped Lady Blackwell's arm and helped her to her feet. Swallowing hard, Sarah drove herself to stand, her legs feeling heavy as she forced herself to walk after them. The footman was supporting Lady Blackwell as best he could, leaving Sarah to walk entirely alone.

Her heart was pounding, her mind going through all of the many disastrous things which might have occurred. She had no doubt that the red stains were blood, and that awareness made her feel sick with fear.

"Lady Blackwell."

Sarah's head flew up as a familiar voice reached her ears. Much to her surprise she saw not only Lord Harrogate but also Lord Ware standing in the doorway. Evidently, they had arrived early.

"We have just seen what happened," Lord Ware said, his loud voice seeming to fill the room. "Let us bring you to him."

He stepped forward and offered Lady Blackwell his other arm, whilst Lord Harrogate came to Sarah.

"My dear lady," he murmured, catching her arm under his as she looked up into his face, hardly able to take in all that was occurring. "Your father is –"

"What is that?"

Horror flooded her heart as Lord Harrogate's jacket opened for a moment, revealing to her a flash of something which she could not quite make out. He had clearly unbuttoned it on his way into the house and, as he had bent his frame to look into her eyes, the jacket had opened enough for her to see what was kept within an inner pocket.

Lord Harrogate frowned as though he had quite forgotten what was there, only for his eyes to round as he realized what it was.

"Miss Graham," he said hastily, trying to close his jacket with his free hand, "that is not as it appears. I assure you that –"

She wrenched her arm from his, stumbling back just a little. Lord Ware and Lady Blackwell had already exited the room, leaving her to stand alone as she stared at Lord Harrogate.

"I found it just as we were approaching the scene," Lord Harrogate

said, holding both hands out to her, palms outwards as he begged innocence. “There is nothing more to it than that, I assure you. I thought it might give us insight into who did such a thing.”

Closing her eyes, Sarah forced in a breath.

“What is it, Lord Harrogate?” she asked, even though she was already all too aware of what it could be.

She did not need someone to tell her what had happened to her father, did not need to be shown what was in Lord Harrogate’s inside pocket. She had already worked it out.

“I found it,” he repeated, drawing out the item and setting it on the table before her. It was, she noted, a long, thin blade with a wooden handle. A handkerchief had been wrapped about it but near the handle had not been covered. That had been what she had seen, what had glinted as he had made to help her. “Lord Ware will state the same,” Lord Harrogate said, speaking more urgently now. “I am not to blame, Miss Graham. I would never –”

“Is my father near death?”

A little surprised at how strong her voice was, Sarah looked up into Lord Harrogate’s eyes, finding herself shaking inside as she waited for his response. She did not know what to think, did not know what to do now that the dagger was laid out for her to see. Her mind refused to move from that one question, fearing that her father would soon be gone from her.

Lord Harrogate’s expression softened, and he came a little closer to her.

“I do not know,” he said, honestly. “A surgeon has been sent for, but he was conscious and speaking to the servants as we arrived.” Reaching out one hand towards her, he held her gaze steadily, clearly desperate for her to take his hand. “We must go to him. He wants to speak to you.”

Sarah closed her eyes and drew in a shuddering breath. She did not know whether or not all that Lord Harrogate said was true but, for the moment, she did not need to know for certain. All she had to do was see her father, for he had requested her presence and, should this be his last few hours, she wanted nothing more than to be by his side.

“Take me to him.” With a trembling hand, she reached out and took Lord Harrogate’s in her own. “Take me to my father, Lord Harrogate.”

Her voice was trembling and weak, but Lord Harrogate’s strong hand grasped hers with a confidence that promised her he would remain by her side for as long as she required him. He scooped up the dreadful knife again, no doubt so that a servant would not come upon it.

“At once, Miss Graham,” he murmured, before leading her from

the room.

Chapter Eleven

Daniel's heart was beating so fiercely that his breathing was becoming a little ragged. He led Miss Graham along the hallway to where he had last seen Lord Blackwell, feeling her cling to him as though he were her only anchor. He heard a short yet loud exclamation which he presumed was from Lady Blackwell and, in response, heard Miss Graham let out a soft cry. Silently, he prayed that Lord Blackwell would not be close to death, that the surgeon would come quickly and that he would, in time, be restored.

He had not quite been able to take in what he'd witnessed, still realizing the extent of the horror that had been thrust upon him. Lord Ware had been walking alongside Daniel as they'd made their way to Lord Blackwell's home to see Miss Graham and, he hoped, Lord Blackwell himself. Miss Graham had written to him to invite him to call and had made it quite plain that she would make certain that there was an audience between them and her father. Daniel had felt great delight and expectation at the invitation, and had been eager to make his way to the townhouse, arriving only to see Lord Blackwell practically falling out of his carriage.

His breath hitched as he led Miss Graham into the parlor, where Lord Blackwell now lay. The surgeon had arrived with great speed it seemed, for he was already leaning over Lord Blackwell and muttering something under his breath. Lady Blackwell was sitting down in a chair next to her husband's head, her hand on his brow and her face white but yet untouched by tears.

"Father."

Miss Graham's whisper brought Daniel back to himself and he made to release the lady so that she might go to Lord Blackwell, only for Miss Graham to let out a shuddering breath and lean into him all the more. Seeking only to comfort her, Daniel put one hand around her shoulders and pulled her close as the surgeon continued his examination. Her head rested on his shoulder, her hand on his chest as they waited in silence.

"I will need a red-hot poker." Daniel heard Miss Graham gasp in horror, her face turning so that it pressed hard into his chest. "If you wish Lord Blackwell to live, then I require a red-hot poker," the

surgeon said again, looking hard at Lady Blackwell. “Do you understand, my Lady?”

Watching Lady Blackwell intently, Daniel willed for her to nod, to agree to the surgeon’s suggestion, and was relieved when she did so.

“We must leave the room, Miss Graham,” he murmured, as Lady Blackwell quickly ordered two of the footmen to stoke the fire, her head lifting and her shoulders straightening with an untold, inner strength. “You will not wish to witness this.”

Miss Graham said nothing for a moment, although he felt her shudder, clearly understanding that the surgeon would attempt to close the wound through searing it. No doubt there would be a great deal of pain for Lord Blackwell but, given that he might die from loss of blood, Daniel knew that there was no other choice.

“Very well.” Miss Graham whispered her response but stepped away from him, going towards her mother. Daniel watched as Lady Blackwell clung to her daughter for a moment before murmuring a few words in her ear. The fire had already been lit and the flames were growing steadily, filling the room with heat. Daniel cast a glance towards Lord Ware, who nodded and, as Miss Graham stepped away, moved in so that he might also speak to Lady Blackwell. In a few moments, Daniel, Miss Graham, and Lord Ware were all gone from the room, leaving Lord Blackwell, Lady Blackwell, and the surgeon behind.

“He will recover, I am sure of it.”

Lord Ware’s voice was filled with a confidence that seemed to embolden Miss Graham somewhat, for she looked up at him quickly with eyes that begged for a little hope.

“Do you think so?”

“We must pray so,” Daniel answered, still leading Miss Graham along the hallway whilst Lord Ware walked on her other side. “Shall we go to the drawing-room again, Miss Graham?”

Nodding, the three walked in silence as they made their way into the drawing-room. Daniel was grateful for the fresh tea tray that had been set out. The housekeeper or considerate maid must have thought to do so for the sake of Miss Graham and Lady Blackwell. He hoped for something a little stronger and looked around the room for a decanter. Lord Ware, it seemed, had already had much the same thought and, as Daniel made certain that Miss Graham was sitting down comfortably, had made his way to the corner of the room, and poured out three small brandies.

“Here, Miss Graham.”

He handed one to the lady and then one to Daniel, who took it without question. What they had witnessed had been very terrible indeed and even now, Daniel could feel the shock washing through

him. Sinking down into the chair next to Miss Graham, Daniel took another sip of his brandy and waited for her to speak.

Miss Graham let out a shuddering breath, closing her eyes as she did so as both hands wrapped themselves around her brandy glass as though to hold onto it tightly would bring her a sense of calm. It took her some time to speak but Daniel did not rush her, hardly able to imagine all that she must be feeling at this present moment.

"You have the knife, Lord Harrogate." Her voice was thin with weariness and her eyes did not open as she spoke. "Pray, tell me how you found it."

Daniel shook his head, rifling one hand through his hair. There had been a horrible moment when he had first found her when he feared she would think him responsible – and he had to pray that there was not even a thought of that now.

"Lord Ware and I were approaching the townhouse, our carriage having set us down a little way down the street," he began, speaking slowly so that he would not forget anything and have to add to his explanation later. "A carriage drew up just as we were making our way to it, and we held back for a moment as we presumed it was Lord Blackwell, given the crest." Miss Graham opened her eyes and turned her head so that she might look at him, but she did not make any remark. "A footman came to open the carriage door and, just as he did so, Lord Blackwell…" he hesitated, his throat beginning to constrict as he recalled what he had seen. "Miss Graham, your father collapsed."

Her eyes rounded.

"He fell from the carriage – it was as if he had been leaning against the door, and when it was opened, he fell." Lord Ware put in, as Miss Graham's cheeks paled all the more, leaving her with an almost ethereal appearance. "There was a great commotion and, of course, we went to assist him at once."

"That is when I saw the knife," Daniel added, hastily. "Lord Ware had seen it also. Making certain that Lord Blackwell had been taken inside, I pulled out my kerchief and wrapped the blade, before putting it into my pocket so that we might examine it at a later time."

Lord Ware nodded, although he also began to pace up and down the room with short, quick strides as a great frown pulled at his brows.

"There was no-one else inside the carriage," Daniel finished, seeing a great swell of tears form in Miss Graham's eyes. "But the door on the opposite side was ajar." When Miss Graham closed her eyes, tears slid from them and made their way slowly down her cheeks. Daniel, unable to stand the sight of such a thing without attempting to comfort her, reached across and settled one hand over hers, pressing her fingers gently. "I am terribly sorry, Miss Graham," he said, aware

of just how useless such a sentiment was. “I am hopeful that Lord Blackwell will recover.”

Miss Graham swallowed hard but said nothing, merely giving him a small, jerky nod.

“I believe that your father’s assailant was in the carriage with him, Miss Graham,” Lord Ware said, gently. “I am certain that we will discover him.”

“How will you do so?” Miss Graham’s words were sharp and yet her voice trembled. “My father will be in a great deal of pain and might well be too weak to even speak of what has occurred!” She threw out both her hands, pulling herself away from him. “And whilst I am sure that you may be able to discover something from this… this…” Her face screwed up tightly. “This *weapon*, I am not at all certain that it will be of any particular use!”

“We must hope,” Daniel said, as calmly as he could. “You must do all you can to support and aid your father whilst Lord Ware and I –”

“It is to do with the Duke.”

Her words sliced through the air and brought both Daniel and Lord Ware to silence. They fixed their gaze upon Miss Graham, expecting her to say something more, something which would give them an explanation of what might have made her believe so. The silence began to drag on and Daniel found himself on his feet, a nervous anxiety pushing through his limbs. Rather than pacing, as Lord Ware had done, he set about pouring the tea for Miss Graham whilst finding his heart beating all the more quickly as he waited for her to explain.

“My father and the Duke have had many conversations.” Miss Graham’s voice was quieter now and, as Daniel handed her the teacup, he saw that her face held a touch more color but that her green eyes flickered with a growing determination. “My father has only recently asked me to inform him if anyone I knew was asking me about my cousin a little more than I would have expected.”

“To see if there was an unhealthy interest there?” Lord Ware asked as Miss Graham nodded. “And had you anyone to name?”

Daniel dropped his head, waiting for her to state that she had mentioned his name to Lord Blackwell, only for Miss Graham to shake her head.

“I did not,” she said, her eyes meeting Daniel’s for the briefest of moments. “There have been occasions when I have wondered whether or not….” She trailed off, closing her eyes for a moment. “No, there was no-one,” she said, a little more firmly this time.

Taking in a slow, steady breath, Daniel closed his eyes also and tried to think clearly.

“We must consider that this is all connected,” he found himself saying, opening his eyes to see both Miss Graham and Lord Ware

looking at him steadily, both waiting for him to continue with an explanation. Taking a few steps closer to the mantlepiece, Daniel continued to let his thoughts tie themselves together so that he might make comprehensible sense when it came to expressing himself. “Let us start at the beginning.” Turning on his heel, he spread his hands. “The Duke of Abernyte is missing.”

Lord Ware nodded, his expression grave.

“We must consider him to be so, yes,” he agreed, whilst Miss Graham watched Daniel in silence.

“Your father, Miss Graham, is aware of the Duke’s ongoing work for the war effort on behalf of the King.”

“He is,” Miss Graham agreed quietly, confirming Daniel’s words. “I would say that, although he does not speak of it often to me, he is more involved in matters than he would ever wish to say.” One shoulder lifted in a half shrug. “Although he does not know where the Duke has gone, and I know that he is concerned about him.”

Daniel ran one hand through his hair again, sending it awry as he continued to speak.

“I too was attacked,” he said, slowly. “Someone believed that I knew about the Duke of Abernyte and would know where he was at present.”

“And now Viscount Blackwell has been attacked,” Lord Ware finished, as Miss Graham closed her eyes and took in a sharp breath, as though to be reminded of her father’s plight had shocked her anew. “You believe it is all intertwined together?”

“I do.”

Miss Graham looked up at him steadily.

“I know that you believed that there was a chance that *I* had been the one to tell particular gentlemen about your interest in the Duke,” she said, her voice still tremulous but a growing strength flooding her eyes. “Given that you know it was not I, might you have any suspicion as to who else it could be?”

Try as he might, Daniel could not come up with a single name. He hesitated, practically willing for someone to come to mind, but nothing happened. Sighing heavily, he shook his head.

“Then we must search my father’s papers.” His head shot up and he stared at Miss Graham. “That is the only thing that we can do at present,” she said, firmly. “After all, if we are to find out the name of the gentleman who injured you, Lord Harrogate, as well as find any sort of clue as to who has injured my father so, then we must do all we can to discover any names.” She sighed, her shoulders dropping as she looked away from him. “I will not simply sit here and wait for news,” she finished, her voice now losing a good deal of its determination. “I *cannot.*”

Daniel shot a quick glance towards Lord Ware but, after a few moments, saw the gentleman nod. It appeared that he also agreed that this was a matter of great significance and thus had concluded that going through Lord Blackwell's papers was the correct way to proceed.

"My father spoke to me of the war, of his involvement," Miss Graham murmured, speaking half to herself. "He did not tell me everything, but I have always been willing to listen and to understand what I can." Her eyes closed tightly. "Would that I had even an *inkling* as to who it was that has done this."

"You must not blame yourself," Daniel replied, swiftly. "This is not your doing, nor do you bear even a single modicum of responsibility."

"Indeed, you do not, Miss Graham," Lord Ware added, firmly. "These are men of stealth and steel, who will do whatever they can to weaken the British forces." His jaw was tight, his brow lowered and his eyes glinting with anger. "They will not hold back from what they deem to be both necessary and demanded of them. Our only hope is to discover their names so that they might be removed from their position in society and kept far from the war effort."

Daniel made his way back to his seat next to Miss Graham and, without hesitating, took her hand in his.

"You bear no blame, Miss Graham," he said gently, seeing how her eyes glistened with tears. "Your father will be set to rights and, in time, will recover fully, I am sure of it."

He smiled at her and pressed her hand, only for her to settle her free hand on top of their joined ones.

"Thank you, Lord Harrogate," she replied, closing her eyes to prevent tears from escaping. "I only pray that you are right."

~

"I DO NOT KNOW where to begin."

Daniel came to stand by Miss Graham's side as they looked at Lord Blackwell's study. The room was neat but very busy indeed, for there were books and papers strewn about practically every surface. His stomach twisted as he considered just how much work would be needed for them to find even a hint of what they were looking for.

"Surely, we begin at his most recent correspondence!" Lord Ware said, sounding much more hopeful than Daniel felt. "It must be here somewhere!"

He gestured to the study table and waited for Miss Graham to step forward, clearly as uncomfortable as Daniel in making the first foray into Lord Blackwell's private items.

"I – I do not know where he would keep such things," Miss Graham replied, a little hoarsely, as she took a few tentative steps

towards her father's large study desk. "If it was private correspondence then…." Biting her lip, she gave a small, sharp shake of her head and then set both hands down on the desk, taking in a long breath that seemed to lift her frame. "I do hope that my father will forgive me," she muttered, before pulling open one of the drawers. Daniel stepped closer, finally feeling able to pick up a sheaf of papers and begin to rifle through them. There was nothing of importance, however. What he was holding appeared to be nothing more than bills that had already been paid.

"I know my father receives a great many letters," Miss Graham murmured. "I presume most gentlemen do, of course, but I could not tell where my father might keep what he has already read."

She frowned and pulled hard at another drawer, only to let out a small exclamation.

Daniel set down the papers and came to her at once.

"This drawer will not open," she said, frowning hard as she gestured to it. "I cannot…" Trailing off, she pulled at it again, but it refused to move. Frowning, she bent low and let out another cry of surprise. "It requires a key!"

This did not surprise Daniel for he also had a desk with many drawers which would lock only with a small key, although he did not make much use of them.

"Do you know where Lord Blackwell might keep such a thing?"

Miss Graham shook her head.

"I do not," she said, sounding a little desperate. "And it is not as though I can go and ask my father, given the state of difficulty that he is in at present."

She looked up at Daniel and he was caught by the desperation and fear which clouded her expression.

"We will find a way to open it," he said, reaching out to grasp her hand for a moment and feeling how her fingers clung to his. "Have no fear, Miss Graham."

Lord Ware stepped closer.

"We might have to break it open."

Daniel allowed himself a small smile.

"My thoughts precisely, Ware."

With a quick glance towards Miss Graham, he reluctantly released her hand and then looked all around the room for something with which they might attempt to break the lock. Within a few minutes – and much effort from himself and Lord Ware, the drawer was broken and, finally, they were able to pull it out entirely.

As Miss Graham bent her head to look over the sheaf of papers, Daniel felt his heart begin to pound furiously. Would there be anything of use in amongst these papers? Surely there had to be

something of significance, given that Lord Blackwell had done all he could to make certain that the letters were secure.

"It is…" Miss Graham's eyes rounded, and she held out a letter to Daniel with a shaking hand. "It is from the Duke!"

Daniel grasped it at once, leaving Miss Graham to clasp her hands together at her heart, looking up at him with wide, astonished eyes.

"'My dear uncle,'" he read aloud. "'I can only apologize for my lack of correspondence. I have been taken ill for some weeks and have only now the strength to write to you. My intention is to return to London, but I do not yet have the wherewithal to do so. Once I am recovered, I will make my way to London and inform you of all I have discovered.'" His eyes flared wide, and he looked back at Miss Graham, who had a small yet relieved smile on her lips. "Then he is well."

"Well enough, it seems," Lord Ware replied, grimly. "But that does not aid us in any way, save to know that the Duke of Abernyte has not disappeared from society for good, as we might have thought."

Frowning, Daniel's lips twisted as he looked down at the letter. Lord Ware was quite correct. It gave no information of any importance but, at the very least, he was glad to know that the Duke was alive.

"There is more," Miss Graham said, hurriedly. "This must have come a short time after that first letter." She had unfolded another letter and had read it already, looking up at both Daniel and Lord Ware before she began. "'I have to inform you that my doctor believes me to have been poisoned,'" she read, her cheeks paling. "'Had it not been for Lord Brinsworth, who was with me before he returned to the fighting, I would have been quite done for. I write this to beg of you to be careful, Lord Blackwell. You may not be as involved in this affair as you once were, but there are a great many enemies within our very circle. I beg you to be on your guard.'"

Daniel frowned.

"Then Lord Blackwell might have known the gentleman who attacked him in his carriage," he said, slowly. "Someone who knew that the Duke had been in correspondence with Lord Blackwell. Someone who had sought him out. Someone who –"

A horrified gasp came from Miss Graham and, the minute Daniel turned to look at her, he knew that she had been struck by something of great significance. Her green eyes were alive with dismay, her mouth forming a perfect circle as she held his gaze fixedly.

"I… I believe I know," she said, hoarsely. "I believe I know the name of at least one gentleman."

"Who is it?" Lord Ware demanded, as Daniel leaned closer to her. "Who is it that you believe is involved, Miss Graham?"

For a moment, Daniel thought that she was about to answer immediately but, after a few seconds, she closed her mouth and shook her head.

"Florence," she said, confusing Daniel. "I must speak to Florence." Seeing his confused look, she gave him a small smile. "My cousin has mentioned something about a gentleman enquiring about the Duke," she explained. "She would not give me the name of this particular person, but I am determined to find out."

"And if it is the name that you have held in your mind?" Daniel asked, realizing what she was doing by keeping the name from them. She did not want to lay blame where it was not fair to do so.

Miss Graham lifted her chin, all traces of tears gone from her expression.

"Then I believe we will have the culprit," she said, decisively. "We will know the name of the man who injured my father so."

"The man who is eager to see the success of France," Lord Ware muttered.

Daniel nodded, his heart both glad to know that there was the possibility of bringing the matter to a close and also very heavy indeed with the burden of what was now to rest upon them all. They had the responsibility, the duty, to discover the truth and to lay the blame squarely at the feet of whoever was responsible for Lord Blackwell's injuries. What would happen to that particular gentleman thereafter, Daniel was not quite certain – but he knew that the man would not be able to linger in society for much longer.

"Then let us go and speak to your cousin," he said, seeing that there was no time to be lost. "We must know."

"Indeed, we must," Miss Graham replied, getting to her feet, and lifting her chin. "I will write to her to come at once." Her eyes glittered. "Have no doubt, Lord Ware, Lord Harrogate," she finished, her whole body seeming to emanate both a confidence and a determination. "We will know the truth soon enough."

Chapter Twelve

“*My lady?*”

Sarah looked up and then instantly rose to her feet as a maid came scurrying into the room.

“Yes?” Her heart was pounding furiously as she waited for the maid to speak, knowing that she awaited news of both her father and her cousin. “Is it my father?”

The maid nodded and then dropped her head. Sarah’s heart dropped to the floor. Was she about to be told of his passing?

“The surgeon did as he had said, my lady,” the maid began, her head still low. “The wound has been…” She shuddered violently, clearly unable to say how the bleeding had been stopped by the red-hot poker searing the wound closed. “Lord Blackwell is resting, and the surgeon believes that he will recover, in time.”

Such was the relief which swamped Sarah that she took a small step back, feeling herself a little dizzy. Lord Harrogate was by her side in an instant, his hand about her waist so that he might support her.

“I thank you,” she whispered, before speaking again to the maid. “Does my father wish to speak with me?”

The maid hesitated, then looked up into Sarah’s eyes.

“Your mother is with him at present, but he isn’t conscious, my lady,” she said, honestly. “Shall I ask Her Ladyship?”

Sarah shook her head.

“I will go to see them both, when my mother is ready,” she said, quietly. “My aunt and my cousin will be arriving very shortly. Please make certain that all is prepared for their arrival.”

The maid nodded and, after taking another order for a fresh tea tray and something to fortify them all – for it was nearing the evening and a meal must be prepared for those who would eat – left the room.

“Go to your father, Miss Graham.”

Sarah looked up into Lord Harrogate’s eyes.

“He is not conscious at present.”

“But you will be the better for seeing him,” he told her, gently. “And your mother, I am sure, would be grateful also.” A gentle press to the small of her back further encouraged her. “I will go with you, should you wish it?”

Swallowing a sudden lump in her throat, Sarah drew in a deep breath, set her shoulders, and shook her head. She was, she realized, a little afraid of going to see her father; afraid of what she might see and what she might, thereafter, feel. But Lord Harrogate was right. It would do her good to see her father still breathing, to make certain that he was quite well.

"I will manage," she murmured, turning slightly so that she might lift a hand to Lord Harrogate's cheek. It was a tender gesture, but one that she felt was more than merited. In the last few hours, Lord Harrogate had become more dear to her than she had ever expected, for he had proven himself to be a tower of strength, showing an equal desire to protect and to encourage her. What she would have done had he not appeared, she did not know. Lord Harrogate's blue eyes held hers for some moments and there was something momentous exchanged between them in the silence that followed. Something which promised that, should they bring this particular matter to a close, there would be far more for them both to explore when it came to their personal connection. Something which told her that Lord Harrogate felt more for her than he could, at present, express. Something which filled her with great hope and expectation, despite the circumstances. When he captured her hand and pressed a kiss to it, Sarah's heart filled with a wonderful affection which she took with her as she walked from the room, ready to see her father.

~

"MAMA?"

Lady Blackwell rose from her chair the instant Sarah stepped into the room. The next moment, Sarah was enfolded in her mother's embrace which, of course, she returned at once.

"He is still with us," Lady Blackwell whispered, hoarsely. "The surgeon believes he will recover."

"I am very glad," Sarah replied, turning her head so that she might look at her father as he lay, quietly, in his bed. He was an ethereal figure, with the paleness of his skin and the way that the white sheets were pulled up around him, but she took comfort in the steady rise and fall of his chest.

"Are you well, Mama?" she asked, leaning back, and looking into her mother's face. "I have written to my aunt and cousin. I am sure that they will be here presently. Lord Ware and Lord Harrogate are both here still and will not depart until they are certain that all is as well as it can be. The cook is setting out a meal for those who will wish to eat." She smiled a little tremulously, a little overwhelmed by the relief which now coursed through her veins. "You will need to

make certain that you do so, Mama. We cannot have you falling ill!"

Lady Blackwell let out a choked laugh and then began to cry, one hand pressed to her face as sobs racked her frame. Sarah stepped forward and pulled her mother into another tight embrace, not knowing what else to do. Tears formed in her own eyes as Lady Blackwell released all that she had been holding back within her and, together, mother and daughter stood, at one in their fear, in their relief and in their hope that Lord Blackwell would, one day soon, return to his former strength.

~

"OH, MY DEAR COUSIN!"

Sarah rose and quickly embraced Florence, but she did not allow her to remain so for long.

"I cannot believe what has taken place!" Florence exclaimed, looking into Sarah's face with wide, astonished eyes. "Your father has been attacked and now lies in his bed, close to death!"

"The surgeon is very hopeful that he will recover," Sarah answered, not allowing Florence's ill-considered words into her heart. "Your mother is –"

"She is gone to Lady Blackwell, of course," Florence interrupted, finally releasing Sarah, and then plumping down on the sofa behind her. "I thought that I should come to encourage and support you also, but…" Her eyes widened as, finally, she took in the two gentlemen present in the room. "You have company, it seems."

Sarah nodded, lifting her chin, and fixing Florence with a hard look.

"Florence," she said, firmly. "I must know the name of the gentleman who spoke to you about the Duke." She said nothing more, refusing to explain why Lord Ware and Lord Harrogate were present nor why she wanted to know the name of that gentleman in particular. Florence said nothing for some moments, tilting her head and looking back at Sarah with confusion in her eyes.

"Your father is gravely ill, and this is what concerns you?" she asked eventually, her tone a little mocking. "Goodness, Sarah, I cannot understand–"

"It is imperative that we know," Lord Ware interrupted, rising to his feet, and coming a little closer to them both. His tone was commanding and there was a fierceness in his eyes which Sarah could practically feel. "Pray, do not keep it from us."

Florence blinked in surprise, only to tip her head a little more to the left and turn her gaze back to Sarah.

"You know that I will not."

“Now is not the time to be playing silly games, Florence!” Sarah exploded, her temper suddenly getting the better of her as she looked back at her silly cousin in utter frustration. “We *must* know.”

Florence shrugged, clearly unwilling to give away the name of the gentleman, even despite the circumstances.

“I do not see why you require such a thing,” she said, looking now at Lord Ware and then at Lord Harrogate. “Does it relate in some way to your father, Sarah?”

Sarah gritted her teeth, wishing to goodness that her cousin was not as foolish as this. Could she not sense that there was a great need here at the present moment? That what Sarah was asking for was not something that was merely a matter of interest but, instead, something that was *required*?

“I was thinking of Lord Harrogate,” she said abruptly, aware of the heat that now poured into her face as she spoke but ignoring it entirely. “That is what you wished to know, was it not? I was thinking of Lord Harrogate.”

Florence’s eyes widened and the small smile she had been wearing disappeared in an instant. She was clearly utterly astonished that Sarah had chosen to speak so openly, particularly in front of Lord Harrogate himself! Sarah dared not so much as glance at Lord Harrogate, however, but did not regret that she had spoken so. Florence needed to give them the name of the gentleman who had spoken to her about the Duke and Sarah considered that there had been no other way to extract such information from her.

“Now,” she said, her tone expressing that she was not about to give way on this matter. “You will tell me the name of the gentleman who spoke to you so very earnestly about the Duke of Abernyte, Florence. I have done as you demanded, so now you will do as you have promised.”

For some moments, no one spoke. Florence was still staring, agog, at Sarah and Sarah was all too aware of how both Lord Harrogate and Lord Ware were looking at her. Lifting her chin a fraction and wishing that some of the heat would dissipate from her cheeks, Sarah kept her gaze steady and waited for her cousin to speak.

“Goodness.” Florence blinked rapidly, although Sarah was dismayed to see a twinkle appearing in her cousin’s eyes. “That was a little unexpected, was it not?”

She looked to Lord Harrogate and chuckled, but Sarah reached out and grasped Florence’s hand tightly.

“Florence!”

Her cousin pulled her hand away quickly and waved it about.

“Yes, yes, of course.” Sighing – as though she regretted that she now had to provide them this information, given just how much it had

already gained her – Florence waited for another few moments before she spoke. “It was Lord Northwood.”

Sarah closed her eyes, her whole body jerking with the awareness that the very person she had been suspecting, since that moment in her father’s study, was the gentleman who had spoken to Florence.

"Baron Northwood?" Lord Harrogate had risen to his feet and now came close to both Sarah and Florence. “Is that whom you are speaking of?”

“It is,” Sarah heard Florence say, as she opened her eyes and looked up at Lord Harrogate, seeing how his jaw tightened. “I do not understand the significance, however!”

“It is as I feared.” Sarah rose to her feet and came next to Lord Harrogate, who immediately turned his back on Florence as Lord Ware came to join them. “I know that Lord Northwood came to speak to my father in order to enquire about the Duke of Abernyte, only to then tell my father that he was to go to Bath.”

“But I have seen him in society,” Lord Ware muttered, darkly. “So he did not go.”

Sarah touched Lord Harrogate’s arm.

“He was sitting next to me at Lady Alcott’s dinner,” she said, seeing the way that his eyes flared wide for a moment as he realized the significance of what she had just revealed. “No doubt, had he been paying even the slightest bit of attention, he would have heard us discussing the Duke.” A great wave of guilt washed over her, and she closed her eyes tightly against it. “I believe I even said to you that my father knew of the Duke’s situation at present, but that he would not speak of any particular details to me.”

Lord Harrogate’s fingers tightened on her own.

“That does not mean that you are to blame,” he said, clearly aware of what she was feeling. “But it does give us cause to suspect that he is the one who has done this to your father.”

Sarah’s eyes opened wide, and a startled gasp left her throat as another memory came flooding into her mind.

“And at Almack’s, Lord Northwood was very near us! He would have heard us, yet again, discussing the Duke and your particular interest in him, given that you had gone to join in the fighting.”

Her mind struggled to fix itself onto that evening, trying desperately to recall who she had seen Lord Northwood speaking with.

“He was in conversation with Lord Sumption, as I recall.”

With Lord Harrogate’s remark, Sarah nodded in earnest, remembering it just as he had said.

“That is it, precisely!”

Lord Ware cleared his throat, his brow furrowed. “Might I suggest

that–"

"My lady?"

The butler interrupted their conversation, causing Sarah to start in surprise, for she had not heard his knock.

"Forgive me, my lady, but the Duke of Abernyte has arrived."

Sarah's mouth fell open at the butler's words, having never at all expected to hear such a thing. The Duke was finally here in London? After all of his weeks of absence, he had finally returned to London without, it seemed, any explanation. It was only Florence's excited squeal that brought Sarah back to herself, and she turned on her cousin with such ferocity that the color drained from Florence's face.

"You will not speak a *word* of this to anyone, Florence!" she said hotly, leaving the butler to stand, waiting, by the door. "You will not say anything about what we have asked you nor that you know of the Duke's arrival. It is of the greatest importance. Do you understand?" It was not often that Florence was lost for words but, in this particular moment, she could only let out a small squeak before nodding, her eyes huge. Satisfied, Sarah turned back to the butler. "Have him shown in here please, at once," she said, gesturing for Lord Ware and Lord Harrogate to sit down. "Goodness, it seems that we are to be quite in a confusion this afternoon!"

Her head felt a little weary, filled with all that was to happen and all that had occurred thus far but, despite everything, her heart lifted with both relief and happiness that the Duke was returned to them. When he walked into the room, Sarah made her way towards him immediately, her hands held out.

"Abernyte," she breathed, addressing him in a manner that was indicative of their friendship and their familiarity. "How very good to see you." She took in his features, seeing the paleness of his skin and considering him a little gaunt. "You are unwell!"

"I am recovering," he stated, pressing her hands firmly. "But where is your father?" he asked, coming a little further into the room. "I must beg your forgiveness at my rude manner, but it is imperative that I speak to him first." He frowned. "The butler said I must speak to you first!"

Sarah nodded, hearing the Duke's frustration but grateful that the butler had decided to behave with such wisdom.

"That is understandable," she said, turning to gesture towards Lord Ware and Lord Harrogate. "There has been a great deal happening, Abernyte," she said, as the two men drew near in order to greet the Duke. "But I am glad you are returned. We have much to discuss."

Lord Harrogate bowed, relief filling his expression.

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Your Grace," he said, as Sarah shot another hard glance at Florence, making her sink back

into her chair a little more. “I came to London with the express purpose of seeing you, for I have a letter from the Marquess of Stratham for you.” He spread his hands. “It was to be of the greatest urgency, but I could not discover your whereabouts.”

The Duke’s expression changed in an instant. The color seemed to return to his face almost at once and his eyes, which had been filled with confusion and doubt, now appeared to be alive with interest.

“The Marquess?” he repeated, as Lord Harrogate nodded. “You have been at war, then?”

“I have.”

Leaving the gentlemen to speak, Sarah quickly rang the bell for the maids to bring in refreshments and then, pulling her cousin to her feet, hurried Florence out of the room. She ignored her cousin’s protests and statements that Sarah was behaving inappropriately by removing her from the room, but Sarah was insistent.

“You are not to be a part of this conversation, my dear Florence, for I know that I cannot trust you,” she said, not wanting to speak cruelly but making certain that her cousin knew the truth of why she could not remain. “You have never been one to shy away from gossip and, given that there is a matter of great seriousness about to be discussed, I cannot think that you will remain silent about what you hear.”

“But I will!” Florence protested, but Sarah shook her head.

The attack on her father, the name of Lord Northwood, and the arrival of the Duke now spurred her on to speak with a confidence and a determination she had not required before.

“You will remain in the library and await your mother,” she stated, unequivocally. “We will dine together soon.”

Ignoring the continued protests of Florence, Sarah made her way out of the room and back along the hallway to where the gentlemen awaited her. Her whole body was tired, but she fought back the weariness without difficulty – at least for now. Her mind was alive, her whole being seeming to buzz with the awareness that now they appeared to be on the very cusp of realizing the truth. The fact that the Duke had returned, unharmed and very much alive, had brought her untold relief and she now had confidence that they would bring Lord Northwood to justice if he *had* been the one to injure her father.

Then, she considered, pausing for just a moment, *I might be able to consider what could be between myself and Lord Harrogate.*

That brought a small smile to her face and, despite the circumstances, a joy to her heart that could not be denied. Lord Harrogate cared for her, she was sure of it – and, in return, Sarah knew that her heart held a deep, unrelenting affection for him also. After what she had said aloud to Florence, Lord Harrogate could no

longer hold any doubts when it came to how she herself felt! It had taken a great deal of courage for her to speak as she had and had also brought with it a sense of deep embarrassment, but Sarah did not regret what she had said. It had been the truth, and she could not be displeased with that. Now, what might be between them was held out like a wonderful promise for her simply to grasp hold of, once the clouds of this predicament finally parted. With a deep breath, Sarah continued on her way and walked back into the drawing-room, preparing herself for what would come next.

Chapter Thirteen

"How fares your father, Miss Graham?"

Daniel moved quickly towards the lady as he spoke, wanting to steal her attention completely. He had been awaiting her arrival for some time and, the moment that she entered with the Duke of Abernyte by her side, Daniel found himself desperate to go to her. He waited until Lord Ware had greeted them both, being both patient and gentlemanly, but now the time had come for him to speak.

"He is most grateful to you, Lord Harrogate," came the gentle reply, which was followed by a bright smile. "He is recovering. He was awake late last evening, only a short time after yourself and Lord Ware took your leave, and we were able to speak for a few minutes."

Daniel let out a breath of relief.

"I am delighted to hear it," he told her. "Your mother is also well?"

"She has not left my father's side for even a moment," Miss Graham answered, with a gentle smile. "There is a great devotion between my parents."

"One that I hope you might also come to have in your own life, Miss Graham," he responded, without even thinking that such a remark might appear a little forward. "Very soon, mayhap." His heart had swelled with such a great relief and gladness upon seeing her that he found his tongue loosened and all that he wished to say being spoken without even a second thought. "I do hope that you are aware of just how deeply I have come to –"

"The note, Lord Harrogate?"

His conversation was cut off just as he had been about to express something of great importance, frustrating Daniel entirely. Whether or not it was an appropriate moment to express his feelings, he did not care, but it seemed that regardless, it was not to be.

"The note," he muttered, not quite certain what the Duke was asking for given that Daniel's thoughts were fixed entirely on Miss Graham. "Ah, yes…" Throwing her an apologetic look – which she returned with a smile and a twinkle in her eyes – he nodded. "But of course."

The Duke of Abernyte had been most eager to read the note which the Marquess had sent him but, such had been his responsibility to his

uncle, aunt, and cousin that he had been forced to wait. Having arranged this meeting at Daniel's townhouse for the following evening, they now stood together in his study, waiting for him to find the note and to finally give it to the Duke. A sense of his duty returned to Daniel as he made his way around to his study desk, pulling out a small key from his pocket as he did so. Unlocking the drawer carefully, he then took out the small, wooden box and opened it.

The note remained just as he had left it; bound by a seal and still holding all of its secrets tightly within. Picking it up, Daniel handed it to the Duke, who took it without hesitation.

"I thank you."

A heavy, somewhat contented sigh escaped from Daniel's lips as he watched the Duke break the seal. The promise he had made to the Marquess of Stratham had finally been fulfilled. His duty – at least, in this regard – was complete.

The air in the room seemed to grow hot and stifling as Lord Ware, Miss Graham and Daniel watched the Duke read the note. The man's expression changed entirely, for his eyes narrowed, his jaw tightened, and his brows lowered down over his eyes. Whatever the Marquess had said, it was a very grave matter indeed. There was within Daniel's heart and mind, an eagerness to know precisely what it was that the note had said and why Daniel had been charged to give it to the Duke with such urgency, but he forced himself to remain completely silent. Whatever was contained within was clearly of the utmost importance and, mayhap, Daniel had no right to know of what it said.

"Would that I had not been taken ill!"

The Duke threw his head back, his eyes tightly closed in frustration for a few moments. Daniel glanced at Miss Graham but saw that she too was watching the Duke with wide, uncertain eyes.

"It was hardly your doing, Your Grace," Lord Ware said, bringing a calm to the room which Daniel felt was very much required. "You were, as you said, poisoned by one of our enemies."

The Duke sighed and ran one hand over his eyes.

"It seems that the enemy is here in London," he said, heavily. "The Marquess of Stratham has written to inform me that a recent captive from the French side was more than willing to talk if it meant his life would be spared." Shaking his head, he dropped his hand. "He states that there are at least five particular gentlemen within the *ton* whom he knows are certain to assist France in any way they can."

"Five?" Daniel repeated, a cold hand wrapping around his heart.

To betray one's country in such a manner was dreadful indeed and he could hardly begin to understand what would be in a gentleman's mind for him to behave in such a fashion.

Miss Graham spoke up.

“Five that he knows of,” she stated, as the Duke nodded. “Goodness. That is quite terrible.”

“At least we know that one is Baron Northwood,” Lord Ware put in, helpfully. “Although quite how we are going to extract such a truth from him, I do not know.”

The Duke grimaced.

“Lord Stratham has asked me to find the names of these gentlemen and to remove them from their position in society in such a manner that the *ton* does not become aware of it,” he muttered, looking down at the letter in his hand once more. “He finishes by stating that he is certain these particular gentlemen are assisting with plans to invade England, just as we have suspected.”

“An invasion at the coast,” Miss Graham added, clearly aware of what had been spoken of as regarded the war and their enemy. “That is why you have been away, Abernyte.”

Again, the Duke nodded although not even a flicker of light came into his expression.

“Precisely. I have discovered a good deal and certain…,” he tilted his head, “certain people have been asked to remove themselves from this country and make their way to the land they must now call home, given their allegiance.” His brow furrowed all the more, a steely look in his eyes. “But we are not at all near the end of things.”

Daniel considered this for a few moments, then frowned.

“Might I ask, Your Grace, why Lord Northwood continued to ask about where you might be? Why did he make his eagerness to find you so very apparent?” This question was not easily answered, it seemed, for Lord Ware, Miss Graham, and the Duke himself did not speak a word of response for some minutes. Instead, they all remained quite silent and occasionally glanced at one another. “It does not seem particularly wise of him to do so,” Daniel added, not quite certain what else to say. “That is all I meant by such a question.”

The Duke nodded slowly, his eyes a little hooded.

“Not all gentlemen are blessed with wisdom, I suppose,” he replied, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly. “It may be that Lord Northwood is just a little stupid.”

Daniel laughed and the tension in the room dissipated in an instant.

“That may well be.”

“I am certain that he was seeking your presence here in London so that he might continue what was begun,” Miss Graham said stiffly, the laughter being pulled from the room immediately, given her tone. “You were, you believed, poisoned, Abernyte, is that not so?”

The Duke turned to her.

“Yes, I believe that,” he replied, simply. “Why?”

“Because,” Miss Graham continued, her green eyes dark with either anger or fear – Daniel could not tell which. “Because if the attempt to poison you failed to bring about your death, then the news would have been sent to Lord Northwood in the hope that he would be able to complete the task.” Her words seemed to send an earthquake through the room, for it was as though the floor shifted under Daniel’s feet. He had not even *thought* of such a thing and yet, the way that Miss Graham had said it made it all now so very clear. His heart began to hammer painfully as he looked across at the Duke, seeing how the man’s eyes narrowed as he gazed at Miss Graham, carefully considering what she had said. And then, he let out a long breath, raking one hand through his hair as his head dropped low for a few moments.

“My dear cousin,” the Duke murmured, “I believe you have made the best explanation for what could be going on at this present juncture. I had not considered it but, yes, it would make sense for there to have been such a plan. Unfortunately,” he finished, looking up at Daniel and then to Lord Ware, “my involvement in the war effort is known among many of the *ton*. After all, a Duke cannot simply make his way to a battlefield without someone knowing of it!”

Daniel smiled ruefully, knowing full well that, had anyone of importance come to join the fray, the whole army would have been abuzz with the news before the day’s end. Letters would have been written and sent home and, of course, then all of London would, in time, come to know of it also.

“Then might I ask how we intend to catch Lord Northwood and gain a confession from him?” He moved a little closer to Miss Graham and found himself filled with a new and wonderful admiration for her. “We will not be able to do anything at all if he does not admit to it, however.”

“The ball this evening.” Lord Ware stepped forward and gestured to them all. “We are all dressed to attend it. Why do we not do so?”

Miss Graham blinked.

“I only did so to convince my mother that I would be in attendance with my cousin,” she said, frowning. “But you suggest now that we make our way there regardless of the situation?”

Lord Ware smiled.

“Indeed,” he answered, calmly. “For Lord Northwood will be there, will he not?”

An idea sprang into Daniel’s mind.

“Mayhap, Miss Graham, you might tell Lord Northwood that the Duke of Abernyte arrives back in London and, given just how eager he has been to become acquainted with him, you thought to do so at this present moment!” Seeing her turn to him, he smiled broadly. “All you

need do is state that the Duke is in the card room or some such place and, when Lord Northwood arrives, we will be able to discover the truth from him, one way or the other."

The Duke began to nod.

"Yes, that is a good plan," he agreed, a spark coming into his eyes. "Sarah, you must tell Lord Northwood that I am very tired indeed – fatigued even – and that I have gone to rest in Lord Drysdale's library. Little doubt he will make his way there in the hope of finishing what he has begun."

Daniel looked to Miss Graham, eager to see the same hope and determination which was within his own heart, and, much to his relief, he saw her nod.

"Very well," she said, lifting her chin a notch and settling her shoulders. "Then to the ball we shall go!" She smiled at her cousin. "Lord Drysdale will be delighted to see you, I am sure. His ball will be the talk of all of London, given that it will have the missing Duke arrive at it!"

The Duke laughed before gesturing for them to make their way out of the room. Much to Daniel's surprise, Miss Graham slipped her hand through his arm and looked up at him with a light smile on her face. Daniel's breath caught and, for a moment, he could do nothing but look down into her eyes. The hope of what might come once this whole wretched business came to an end was there in her face and Daniel felt the very same sear his soul. He could hardly wait for this evening to be over so that, finally, he might finish expressing all that was within his heart to Miss Graham, praying that she might feel the same.

~

"Good evening, Lord Northwood!"

Daniel bowed just as Miss Graham curtsied, seeing how Lord Northwood looked towards him and then back at Miss Graham, his interest more than apparent.

"Good evening, Miss Graham," the man replied, before throwing a cursory glance towards Daniel. "And Lord Harrogate."

"Good evening," Daniel replied, as warmly as he could. "I do believe that Miss Graham has some news for you, Lord Northwood."

He chuckled as the man's eyes widened, having decided with Miss Graham only a few minutes earlier that they would not hesitate but would speak about the matter quickly.

"Oh?" Lord Northwood's eyes flitted from Miss Graham to Daniel and back again, clearly a little uncertain. "Good news, I hope?"

"Indeed!" Miss Graham's voice was filled with delight and Daniel

thought her very good indeed at placing a character upon herself that she did not truly feel. “I have only just had the pleasure of being in the company of my cousin, the Duke of Abernyte!”

Daniel watched Lord Northwood closely as Miss Graham spoke, seeing the way that his eyes flared, his whole being stilling suddenly.

“Indeed,” Lord Northwood murmured, softly. “I am glad to hear it, Miss Graham.”

Miss Graham smiled brightly, and clasped both hands together at her heart in an expression of happiness.

“He is here this evening! I could not quite believe that he would re-join society so soon after returning, but he was quite determined!” She laughed and looked at Daniel, who found himself grinning, despite knowing that this was nothing more than a ruse. “He will not dance this evening, however, much to my disappointment.”

Lord Northwood cleared his throat.

“No?”

“No, he is a little tired,” Miss Graham began, but Daniel interrupted her.

“You told me that he was deeply fatigued,” he replied, at which statement Miss Graham sighed and shrugged her shoulders, her smile fading.

“Yes, it would be best to be truthful about his current state of health, I suppose,” she agreed, quietly. “Lord Northwood, he is *very* weary and thus, will not even step into the ballroom! Imagine! He is come to a ball but will not set foot inside the ballroom!”

A tight smile crossed Lord Northwood’s face.

“What a pity,” he murmured. “Might I ask where he is at present? The card room, mayhap?”

Miss Graham shrugged.

“I believe that he said he intended to go to the library, but I cannot be sure.” Her heavy sigh was more than convincing. “I did not pay much attention after he told me that he would not dance.”

“That is a very great pity,” Lord Northwood replied, in a most fervent manner. “I should be glad to sign your dance card, Miss Graham!”

Daniel watched as both Miss Graham and Lord Northwood conversed a little more, seeing how Lord Northwood signed his name hastily, taking no time at all to choose his most favored dance. Then, Lord Northwood took his leave and turned abruptly on his heel, leaving Daniel and Miss Graham to watch him depart.

“It is done.”

“I am sure that he will make his way to the library almost at once,” Daniel murmured, his hand on the small of Miss Graham’s back. “The Duke must be prepared.”

Miss Graham turned and looked up into his face, her eyes set.

"I fully intend to make my way there also," she said, firmly. "I am not about to simply dance and laugh and smile whilst this whole, intricate matter is brought to an end!"

Daniel hesitated, knowing that the Duke had said that he and Lord Ware were to be in the library whilst Daniel and Miss Graham were to go out into the ballroom.

"He may be my cousin and he may be a Duke, but he is not permitted to simply demand that I do one thing or another, Lord Harrogate," Miss Graham finished, her chin lifting. "If you wish to join me, I should be very glad of your company, but I *will* see this to its end."

Once more, Daniel's admiration for the lady grew. She was determined and steadfast and Daniel could not help but admire both qualities. With a small smile, he offered her his arm.

"But of course, Miss Graham," he said, seeing the look of relief that swam through her features as she accepted it. "Let us go and see this to its end."

Chapter Fourteen

"What are you doing here?"

Sarah ignored her cousin's sharp whisper and instead, quickly ensconced herself in one of the darker corners of the library. Lord Ware's quiet chuckle reached her ears and she realized that he too must be hiding somewhere nearby.

"It is done, Your Grace," she heard Lord Harrogate say. "I am certain that Lord Northwood will make his way to you very soon."

The Duke grimaced, his expression rather dark as the flickering flames of the fire which burned merrily in the grate illuminated some of his features.

"I had hoped you would remain and enjoy the ball, Sarah."

This time, she spoke.

"You can hardly imagine that I would have been willing to do so, given that my father has been injured so severely, cousin," she stated, speaking calmly and yet with such a ferocity of tone that all three men stayed silent. "I have been concerned about this matter for some time, suspecting even Lord Harrogate at one point!" She threw up her hands, a little exasperated by the Duke's insistence that she merely go to enjoy the ball. "And if you recall, it was I who suggested that Lord Northwood might be seeking to bring about your end, since the poison did not do all that it was expected to."

The Duke's face did not change for a moment but, when it did, he finally shrugged and turned his head away, although not before Sarah had seen what she believed was a glimmer of a smile. Breathing a little more heavily than before, she pressed herself back against the bookshelves, only to become aware of Lord Harrogate's presence. He moved a little closer to her but then stopped, turning his back to the shelves of books as she had done, so that he might survey the library without difficulty.

Sarah found herself moving closer to him the very next moment. Her hand found his as though it had always been meant to be there and was sorrowful over its lack of companionship. Lord Harrogate twined his fingers with hers at once, his nearness both a comfort and an exhilaration.

She had no time to think of anything more for, at the very next

moment, the door of the library opened, and a gentleman stepped inside.

Sarah's free hand flew to her mouth as the gentleman made his way inside. It was not Lord Northwood, as she had expected. Instead, it was Lord Sumption.

What is he doing here?

"Your Grace!"

Lord Sumption's voice was bright and breezy, sounding quite delighted to see the Duke again although, Sarah considered, there was no apparent surprise upon seeing him. She frowned and moved a fraction closer to Lord Harrogate, knowing that they would be able to safeguard the Duke, should it be required of them.

"Lord….?"

The Duke hesitated, clearly unaware of the gentleman's title.

"Lord Sumption, Your Grace." Lord Sumption's eyes had narrowed and there was a hardness to his voice which Sarah could hear very clearly indeed. "You do not recall me, it seems."

The Duke spread his hands, not rising from his chair as any other gentleman might do.

"Forgive me," he said, jovially. "There are many acquaintances whom I have quite forgotten, it appears. I have been some time away from London and caught up with various matters, but that is not an excuse for rudeness nor forgetfulness." His hands spread a little wider. "I must beg your forgiveness."

Lord Sumption said nothing for a few seconds and the silence which filled the room seemed to be growing steadily, spreading out a dark cloud above their heads. Tension was forming a tight knot in Sarah's stomach, and she did all she could to remain perfectly still and perfectly quiet, not at all certain of what Lord Sumption was doing here or why he was speaking to the Duke so.

"I did not expect you to return to London at all," Lord Sumption said, after a few moments. "I had heard that you were taken *very* ill."

Sarah stiffened and heard Lord Harrogate's swift intake of breath. Had they been wrong about Lord Northwood?

"Unfortunately, the plan to remove you from this situation has failed thus far," Lord Sumption continued quietly, although even Sarah could hear the malice in his voice. "It was foolish to ask young Chandlery to do such a thing. No doubt he was the one who failed."

We have been wrong, Sarah said to herself, her hand grasping Lord Harrogate's tightly. *It is not Lord Northwood. It is Lord Sumption!*

"I know the Baronet," the Duke replied, speaking in calm, measured tones. "You mean to say that he is the one who attempted to kill me?"

A hard laugh came from Lord Sumption and Sarah shivered at the

sound, resisting its attempt to fill her with fear.

"Chandlery has only just agreed to aid us, but I do not think we can keep him within our fold after this," Lord Sumption replied, clearly willing to express all to the Duke. No doubt he had the intention of killing the Duke regardless, so that whatever he might be told now would go to the grave with him. "Yes, he was meant to make certain that you never rose from your bed again, Your Grace, but it seems that he has failed."

"And why would you wish to do such a thing?"

A dark, horrible grin spread across Lord Sumption's face. "Because you are attempting to build strength against something which will take place regardless of what you do," he stated, firmly. "The French *will* invade England. You are merely a thorn in the path which must be torn and trodden upon until it is entirely removed."

At this remark, both Lord Harrogate and Lord Ware moved at once. Lord Ware stepped out into the light whilst Lord Harrogate made his way to the door, standing in front of it so that Lord Sumption could not easily make his way from it. Sarah herself did not move, watching Lord Sumption and seeing how his eyes widened and how the smile fell from his face as he realized he was not alone.

"And what about my father?" She took a few steps forward, making certain to stay behind the Duke so that there was a significant distance between herself and Lord Sumption. No doubt the gentleman had a weapon but, if required, Sarah knew that she could hide behind any of the large, overstuffed chairs until the man was restrained. "You were the one to injure him?"

Lord Sumption did not answer her. Instead, he looked about the room, taking in this new situation. Sarah could practically see the way his thoughts ran from one thing to the next, clearly attempting to find a way to remove himself from this room whilst still fulfilling his requirement of ending the Duke's life.

"You are not about to escape, Lord Sumption." The Duke of Abernyte rose to his feet, standing strong and showing not even the slightest hint of weakness. "There is no escape. Therefore, you had best explain all."

Lord Sumption's lip curled.

"Lord Blackwell was another inconvenience," he said, his hands reaching down towards his waistband and, much to Sarah's horror, pulling out a pistol. "I was told that he knew precisely where the Duke was at present and, having given him the opportunity to tell me of what he knew – an opportunity he declined to take - I was then forced to exact my retribution." Another laugh scorched the room. "After all, it is no good to simply threaten another without having any intention of carrying out one's threat!"

Sarah stilled, her hands tight together as she once more recalled the way her father had been lying on the bed, so white and so still.

"You tried to kill him."

Shrugging, Lord Sumption looked from left to right, considering what he might do next.

"He would not tell me what he knew."

Lord Ware spoke next.

"And you attacked Lord Harrogate in the garden at Almack's," he said, speaking it as a statement rather than a question. "You believed that he knew something of the Duke also."

Lord Sumption nodded, apparently quite at ease in stating all that he knew and all he had done.

"It was a conversation I overheard, between Lord Harrogate and Miss Graham," he answered, his eyes lingering on Sarah for a moment and sending a deep, searing cold all through her. "I had every intention of striking out at him again, should it be required, but I was not entirely convinced that he did, in fact, know anything about where the Duke might be at present."

"Which is why you moved on to my father, in your search for information," Sarah whispered, although she was not certain that Lord Sumption heard her. The truths which he had spoken were both horrific and terrifying, sending tremors all through her, and yet, with it, came the relief that the answers they had been searching for were now set out before them, all in their entirety. Lord Sumption had been the one behind these dreadful acts. Whilst he showed no regret, and certainly had no sorrow for what he had done, Sarah knew that there would be consequences for his actions and that brought her a little comfort.

"You say that you were told that Lord Blackwell knew where the Duke was at present." Lord Harrogate's voice was dark and thick with anger, interrupting Sarah's thoughts. "How did you know such a thing? Who told you?"

Again, the sneer spread across Lord Sumption's face as he turned towards Lord Harrogate.

"I am certain you have identified that yourself, Lord Harrogate," he replied, darkly. "Why do you play such games?"

In an instant, Sarah realized the truth.

"Lord Northwood."

Lord Sumption's words were cruel.

"Such a foolish man," he spat. "Desperate for a little extra coin. He has terrible debts, you know." One shoulder lifted in a cold shrug. "I paid out some of his debts and he considered himself then to be in my debt. It was not difficult to then *encourage* him to do as I wished."

"You asked him to find out what he could about me," the Duke

said, slowly. “So that you might protect yourself, to keep yourself from suspicion.”

“He did very well, do you not think?” Lord Sumption chuckled, appearing quite unperturbed about his current situation. “Although it seems that I have failed at this juncture, however.” His brow lowered and his smile was replaced with a hard line about his mouth. “Lord Northwood informed me that you were deeply fatigued and would be residing in the library for a time. I did not even consider that you might have something else in mind, Your Grace.”

Sarah set her shoulders, a little breathless with her anger but yet a sense of victory rising up within her.

“You have been found out, Lord Sumption,” she stated, firmly. “You have attempted to bring our enemies here, with the sole intention of their succeeding. In doing so, you have harmed Lord Harrogate and attempted to kill both my father *and* the Duke of Abernyte.” She moved a little closer, coming to stand next to her cousin. “Your pistol does not frighten me, Lord Sumption,” she finished, even though the Duke put a restraining hand out in front of her. “You have only one shot. Regardless of what you seek to do with it, you *will* face the consequences of your actions.” She looked down at the Duke, seeing his face set in stone. “I have absolute confidence in that.”

Lord Sumption’s face began to go a mottled red as he looked back at her. His eyes grew even darker than before, and his lip curled.

“You may try to place guilt upon my shoulders, Miss Graham,” he spat, taking a few steps towards her, “but I accept what I have done without question. I know where my loyalty lies, and it is to the country which seeks to *reward* those who do what they can for them. It is not with a country which demands my loyalty but gives me nothing in return.”

“You speak nonsense,” the Duke retorted, rising to his feet. “The King asks for your loyalty, and you ought to give it outright, rather than seek a reward.” His anger seemed to spread out from him, for Sarah could almost feel the heat of it coming from the Duke as she stood there beside him. “You say that Lord Northwood was easily persuaded and manipulated by coin, but I think that you are very much the same. *You* have been promised more wealth, no doubt, and that has been the only thing which has persuaded you to turn your back on your King and country, and to behave with such selfishness and arrogance that you would commit treason.” He took a step closer and, as Sarah watched in horror, she saw Lord Sumption begin to lift his pistol. “You deserve everything that will be placed upon you as consequence, Lord Sumption,” the Duke finished, his voice loud and filling the room. “And I will be glad to see you suffer it.”

The next moment, everything happened at once. Out of the corner of her eye, Sarah saw Lord Harrogate rush forward, just as Lord Sumption raised his pistol, aiming at the Duke. The Duke himself charged to his right, pushing Sarah to the floor, whilst Lord Harrogate flung himself at Lord Sumption. The latter fell hard to the ground but not before a loud retort seemed to shake the room. Terrified that the pistol had hit Lord Harrogate, Sarah immediately began to push herself up from the floor, only to feel the Duke set a resisting hand on her shoulder.

"Wait," he murmured, but Sarah refused to do so. Hearing Lord Ware's shouts mingled with loud groaning, she shoved the Duke back and got to her feet hurriedly, hindered somewhat by her gown.

"Wait, Miss Graham!"

Lord Ware put out one hand and Sarah stopped dead, her face ashen as she stared down at the two figures which lay on the floor. She wanted to speak, wanted to cry out and demand to know whether or not Lord Harrogate was alive, but her lips refused to move. Breathing raggedly, she waited, stuck between fear and wretched hope – only for Lord Harrogate to push himself up on both hands, looking down at the man beneath him.

Relief made her so weak that she could barely stand for a moment, stars filling her vision as she smiled faintly, glad beyond expression that Lord Harrogate appeared to be well.

"Knocked him clean out!"

Lord Harrogate turned to them, staggering a little as he rose to his feet. "Winded myself too, unfortunately."

"How glad I am that you are safe," Sarah replied, a little hoarsely. "Lord Harrogate, I –"

Lord Harrogate did not wait but went to Sarah at once. Ignoring the other two gentlemen present – excluding the one who was now in an unconscious heap by their feet – he caught Sarah up in his arms and pulled her close. Sarah sank into his embrace, her head resting on his chest as the steady beat of his heart comforted her. It was over.

~

"Lord Harrogate, my lady."

Sarah rose at once, her heart pounding as Lord Harrogate stepped into the drawing-room. It had been some three days since Lord Drysdale's ball and Sarah had not seen him even for a moment. He, the Duke, and Lord Ware were making certain that all Lord Sumption had done was known to the relevant people and, in addition, that Lord Sumption suffered the consequences of his actions. Sarah had not asked what such consequences might be specifically, as she felt that

she did not need to know the particulars. It was just a relief to her that it was all at an end now.

"Miss Graham."

Lord Harrogate came into the room and bowed, before stopping abruptly. He looked around and then glanced back towards the door, clearly a little concerned.

"The Duke is in the house, Lord Harrogate," Sarah murmured, a small smile playing about her mouth as she saw the way that his eyes brightened for just a moment. "He will return very soon." Gesturing to a seat near her, she made to sit down, only for Lord Harrogate to walk purposefully towards her and pull her into his arms. She went willingly, looking up into his face and seeing the eagerness in his eyes. Lord Harrogate had decided that he would make the most of the few short minutes they had together!

"I have been thinking of nothing but you," he murmured, his eyes searching her face as though he needed to commit her features to memory. "These last few days have been torturous."

Sarah smiled up at him, her hands pressed lightly on his shoulders.

"It has been an extraordinary few days," she said, softly. "But it is at an end now, I hear."

Lord Harrogate nodded, although his smile did not extend as far as she had expected. Her brow furrowed and she tilted her head to one side, waiting for him to speak rather than ask her question once more.

"It – it *is* at an end," he said, a trifle haltingly. "You are correct in that regard, Miss Graham." Her frown grew but again, Sarah said nothing, waiting for him to explain. "There is more to do," Lord Harrogate said, clearly seeing her need for a further explanation. "Lord Sumption is one gentleman, yes – and Lord Northwood appeared to be quite at a loss when we put it all to him – but there are more."

Sarah's frown shifted to a look of concern.

"You mean to say there are more of Lord Sumption's ilk to discover?"

Lord Harrogate nodded.

"I do."

"And are you to do it?"

Lord Harrogate hesitated, then nodded slowly.

"I should not like to desert the Duke and Lord Ware, not when there is work which needs to be done to protect the country." Pressing his lips together, he looked down at her steadily. "You know that I care for you, Miss Graham. I should very much like to ask you if you might accept my hand, but I would not wish to do so should you prefer a gentleman who is unhindered by such responsibilities."

Sarah took in all that he was saying, marveling at the

consideration he was offering her. If she had thought well of Lord Harrogate before, she thought even more of him now. The fact that he wanted to make certain that any choice she made about their future was with the full awareness of all that it might entail spoke of his heart and all that was held therein.

"How could I refuse such a gentleman?" she asked, softly, seeing how he closed his eyes for a moment in evident relief. "Lord Harrogate, you have proven yourself trustworthy, honorable, and considerate. I should be very proud indeed to stand next to a gentleman who fought to protect his King and his country." Her hands slid slowly around Lord Harrogate's neck as she spoke, her heart filled with love for him. "I have doubted you and I have been confused by you but now that I know both your heart and your character, I find myself loving you."

Lord Harrogate's hand lifted from her waist and brushed lightly across her cheek, his eyes filled with a tenderness that sang to Sarah's heart.

"Then if you will permit me, Sarah," he said, softly. "I should like to ask your father if he will grant me the opportunity to ask you to marry me." His smile brought joy to them both. "Once he is fully restored to health, that is."

"And what will you say?"

Lord Harrogate regarded her steadily for a few moments before he spoke again.

"I will tell him that I have come to find myself utterly enchanted by his daughter," he replied, gently. "I have seen her to be a strong, determined, and yet beautifully kind young lady, who is loyal and who is fierce in her dedication to those she loves." His hand lingered at the nape of her neck and Sarah was aware of a heat growing steadily within her, almost overcome by his words of devotion. "I will tell him that I am lost in love," Lord Harrogate finished, affectionately. "And I will swear to spend each and every day by your side, reminding you of the depths of my devotion *and* my love."

Sarah smiled back at him, already lost in his embrace.

"He will consent," she murmured, knowing that, given that her father was improving with every day which passed, it would not be long until he could speak to Lord Harrogate alone. "And I know precisely what my answer will be also."

"Oh?" Lord Harrogate's smile was a teasing one, his eyes twinkling down at her as his breath whispered across her skin, sending a flurry of expectation all through her. "And what would that be?"

Standing on tiptoe, Sarah pressed her lips to his for just a moment as joy and exhilaration filled her.

"Yes," she whispered, before reaching up to kiss him once more.

I am so glad that Sarah and Lord Harrogate finally trusted each other and hope they have many years of happiness! Please check

My Dear Reader

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All my love,

Rose

A Sneak Peak of A Rogue's Flower

Prologue

"Elsbeth?"

Miss Elsbeth Blakely, daughter to some unknown persons and nothing more than an orphan, turned her head to see Miss Skelton enter the room, her thin figure and skeletal appearance matching her name perfectly.

"Yes, Miss Skelton?" Elsbeth asked, getting to her feet as she knew she was expected to, given that this was the lady in charge of the House for Girls. "What can I do for you?"

Miss Skelton, her black hair tied back into a tight bun, gave a small disparaging sniff. "What are you doing in the schoolroom, Elsbeth? The dinner gong has sounded, has it not?"

Elsbeth did not back down, nor feel ashamed of her tardiness. "I have every intention of coming to the dining hall the moment I have finished my letter," she replied, calmly. "After all, was it not you yourself who told me that I was to leave this place just as soon as I could?" She tilted her head just a little, mousey brown curls tipping across her forehead as she did so. Her hair had always been the bane of her life, for she had such tight curls that it was almost impossible to keep them neat and tidy as she was expected to do.

Miss Skelton sniffed again. "That is no excuse, Elsbeth. I expect better from you."

Elsbeth sighed inwardly, aware that Miss Skelton was almost always disappointed with her. Ever since she could remember, Miss Skelton had been a tall, imposing figure that gave her nothing but disparaging and cutting remarks, designed to bring down her confidence. Elsbeth had, in fact, learned how to stand against Miss Skelton's venomous words, shutting down her emotions and closeting away her heart whenever the lady spoke.

"May I ask what letter it is you are writing?" Miss Skelton asked, her hands now clasped in front of her. Her long, grey dress with its high collar that hid most of her neck hung on her like a shroud, giving her an almost death-like appearance that Elsbeth hated so much.

"I have been responding to advertisements regarding governesses," Elsbeth replied, with a slight lift of her chin. "Mrs. Banks has encouraged me in this and I intend to find a position very soon. I do

hope that you will give me the references I require." She lifted one eyebrow, a slight challenge in her voice as she waited for Miss Skelton to reply. Mrs. Banks, the lady who taught the girls everything from elocution to grammar, had encouraged Elsbeth in her hopes of making a life for herself outside of the Smithfield House for Girls. Mrs. Banks told her that she had all the knowledge and ability required to become a governess. In a recent spat with Miss Skelton, Elsbeth had been urged to leave the House for Girls as soon as she was able. Miss Skelton pointed out how frustrated she was that she could not throw Elsbeth out on her ear; the two things had come together to encourage Elsbeth to indeed depart. What she required of Miss Skelton was a reference to whichever one of her potential employers wrote back to her with further enquiry.

"I suppose I must," Miss Skelton replied, her voice thin. "If it means that I can get you out of this place, then I will do all I can to help you."

Elsbeth found herself smiling, feeling as though she had won victory. "Thank you, Miss Skelton. It is much appreciated, I am sure." Turning her back on the lady, she sat down again and continued to compose her letter, hearing Miss Skelton's mutter of frustration before she left the room.

Breathing a small sigh of relief, Elsbeth let her pen drift over the page, writing the same words she had written on three other occasions. Her desire to become a governess was growing with every day that she had to spend here. Even though it was the only home she had ever known, it was slowly beginning to suffocate her.

The Smithfield House for Girls was right next to the bustling Smithfield Market, but was in direct contrast to the happiness and warmth that came from there. Elsbeth often spent time looking out of her window to the market place, finding her heart filled with both happiness and pain, wishing that she could have the same joys that was in the faces of so many of those who came to the market. They laughed and smiled more than anyone ever did in the House for Girls, mostly due to the fact that Miss Skelton was neither happy nor joyful.

Lost in thought for a moment, Elsbeth looked up from her page and let her gaze drift towards the window. Whilst her life had not been altogether bad thus far, the question about where she had come from and why she was here had always dogged her mind. Miss Skelton had never said a word, other than to state that her living allowances had been paid for – and continued to be paid for – year after year. That was why she could never throw Elsbeth out onto the street, since money was sent specifically for Elsbeth's upkeep. Elsbeth could still remember the day she had asked Miss Skelton who sent the money, only for the door to be shut in her face. That had been the day she had

begun to dislike Miss Skelton intensely. Elsbeth was frustrated that the woman would not give her any information despite seeing the it upset her to have no knowledge of her birth.

Elsbeth had quietly resigned herself to the fact that she would never know, not unless her father or mother came looking for her. It was an agony that would never fully disappear from her heart, the pain of not understanding why she had been sent here as a baby. Why had her parents had turned her over to Miss Skelton instead of keeping her to raise themselves? She did not understand why Miss Skelton would not speak to her about the matter, did not understand why she would not even explain why she would not do so. That, however, was a burden Elsbeth knew she simply had to bear. Miss Skelton was not about to change her mind, in the same way that she was not about to become a warm and kind-hearted lady who cared about the charges in the House she ran.

That being said, Elsbeth knew that most of the girls here were from noblemen or gentlemen who had chosen to have a tryst outside of wedlock or outside their marriages. It was more than obvious that this was the case, for the girls were trained in all manner of gentle arts, instead of simply being fed and given a place to sleep as they would have done in the poorhouse. There were standards here, standards that both she and the others were expected to meet. Most of them might never know their fathers nor their mothers, but at least their chance at a decent life was much greater than if they'd been left at the poorhouse. There were varying choices for them in their futures – although most would become governesses or teachers in places such as these. Some would become seamstresses, others perhaps marry. Elsbeth winced as she recalled that the annual ball was due to take place in two days' time – a chance for the girls who were out to take part in a small gathering where gentlemen in the lower classes could attend in case they were in need of a wife…. or, perhaps, a mistress. She was revolted at the thought, her eyes closing tightly as she fought against the urge to run away from it all. Being now of age, she had no other choice but to attend, even though she was already responding to advertisements for governesses. Whilst Miss Skelton wanted to be rid of her, Elsbeth knew that it would be in any way she could, which included the ball and a potential husband.

Not that the gentlemen who attended were in any way nobility. They were mostly baronets, knights, and the like, who were looking for a wife who could fulfill all their requirements whilst still being of decent standing. In addition, Elsbeth knew that many of the girls had a large dowry set aside for them, although none knew from where it had come. That was what brought such gentlemen to the ball, for even though there might be some murmuring over marriages to girls from

the Smithfield House for Girls, a gentleman could overlook it should there be a large enough dowry.

Elsbeth had not thought to ask about herself, and was, therefore, quite unaware of any dowry she might have. Perhaps there would be a way for her to hide from most of the gentlemen on the evening of the ball, regardless of whether she had a dowry or not. She did not wish to marry. She wanted to experience life outside of this place, a life where she could earn her own living and make her own way if she chose. Marriage was just another four walls around her, keeping her in line.

Sighing heavily, Elsbeth finished writing her letter, sanded it carefully and then folded it up, ready to be posted.

"Please," she whispered, holding the letter carefully in her hand. "Please, let this be the way out of here. Let me find a new life, far away from Smithfield, London and Miss Skelton. Please." Closing her eyes tightly, she sent her prayer heavenwards before rising from her chair and making her way to the dining room. All she could do now was wait.

Chapter One

The following afternoon found Elsbeth finishing her embroidery piece, feeling rather pleased with herself. Embroidery had not come naturally to her and yet here she was, finishing off her final piece.

"Wonderful, Elsbeth!" Mrs. Banks exclaimed, coming to sit by her. "You should be very pleased with your work."

"Thank you, Mrs. Banks," Elsbeth replied, with a chuckle. "Although I will say that I do not understand how anyone can find any kind of enjoyment from such a thing."

Mrs. Banks smiled back, her plump face warm and friendly. "Then I should tell you that I do not particularly enjoy it myself, but it is a useful skill to have when one is seeking a husband."

Elsbeth suppressed a shudder. "Thank goodness I am not doing so."

Mrs. Banks nodded slowly. "The ball is tomorrow night. Did Miss Skelton speak to you about it?"

A niggle of worry tugged at Elsbeth's mind. "No, she did not. Why?"

For a moment, Mrs. Banks looked away, her lips thinning and Elsbeth felt herself grow tense.

"You have a large dowry, Elsbeth. I am surprised Miss Skelton has not spoken to you about this before now."

Elsbeth shook her head, firmly. "I do not care. I will not marry."

"I know, I know," Mrs. Banks said softly, putting one gentle hand on Elsbeth's. "But Miss Skelton will be sharing that news with whichever gentlemen show an interest in you at the ball. You must be prepared for that."

Elsbeth felt ice grip her heart, making her skin prickle. "I do not want to marry," she whispered, her embroidery now sitting uselessly on her lap, completely forgotten. "I know Miss Skelton wishes to get rid of me, but I cannot bring myself to preen in front of eligible gentlemen in the hope of matrimony! I want a life for myself."

Mrs. Banks gave her a small reassuring smile, one hand reaching out to rest on her shoulder. "And I am sure you will receive a return to your letters very soon," she replied, calmly, "but you must be aware of what Miss Skelton intends to do. Your dowry is very large, Elsbeth. You have clearly come from a wealthy family."

Putting her head in her hands, Elsbeth battled frustration. So much money, just out of reach. With it, she could do whatever she pleased, set up a life for herself wherever she wanted.

"Although…."

Her head jerked up as she saw Mrs. Banks look from one place to the next, her eyes a little concerned.

"Although?" Elsbeth repeated, encouraging the lady. "Although what, Mrs. Banks?"

Mrs. Banks paused for a moment before shaking her head. "Never mind. It is not something I should say."

Knowing that Mrs. Banks was the closest thing she had to a friend, Elsbeth reached across and took her hand. "Please, Mrs. Banks, tell me whatever it was you were going to say. I feel so lost already. Anything you can tell me will help." Her blue eyes searched Mrs. Banks' face, desperate to know what the lady was holding back.

"I should not be telling you this, Elsbeth," Mrs. Banks replied quietly, "but I have seen how miserable you are here and how Miss Skelton treats you. I am sorry for that. You are a free spirit and she, being as tight-laced as she is, does not understand that. She has never wanted to nurture you, she has simply wanted to contain you, and I cannot hold with that."

A lump in her throat, Elsbeth squeezed Mrs. Banks' hand. "I know," she replied, quietly. "I have valued your teaching and your friendship over the years."

Mrs. Banks drew in a long breath, her shoulders settling as she came to a decision. "As have I," she said, with a great deal more firmness. "Then I shall tell you the truth about your dowry. If you do not marry before you are twenty-one years of age, then the dowry, in all its entirety, goes to you."

Elsbeth gaped at her, her world slowly beginning to spin around her.

"Just think of it, Elsbeth," Mrs. Banks continued softly, her voice warm. "You need only be a governess for three or four years before you will be truly free. If you are careful, I believe you will have enough to live on for the rest of your days."

Elsbeth could not breathe, her chest constricting. She could hardly believe it, could hardly take it all in, and yet she knew that what Mrs. Banks was saying was the truth. She would not lie to her.

"Why has Miss Skelton never spoken to me about this?" she asked hoarsely, as Mrs. Banks squeezed her hand. "I could have stayed here until…."

"You have answered your own question," Mrs. Banks replied, sadly. "Miss Skelton wants you gone from her establishment and she thought that, in telling you the truth, you would be filled with the

urge to remain. There will be funds aplenty until you reach the age of twenty-one, for I am certain that Miss Skelton told me that whoever it is that pays for your board here would do so until either you are wed, or you are twenty-one."

Elsbeth shook her head, fervently. "That cannot be the case. Miss Skelton told me that I must find a place soon as the money that pays for me will soon cease."

"Another lie, I'm afraid," Mrs. Banks said softly, as Elsbeth felt her heart break all over again. "For whatever reason, Miss Skelton is desperate to have you gone from this place. She forbade me to speak of it to you but I knew I could not keep the truth from you. It is too great a truth to have hidden away. It would have been wrong of me to keep it to myself."

Elsbeth drew in breath after breath, her mind whirling as she tried her best to think calmly and clearly about all that had been revealed to her. Miss Skelton had always disliked her but to hide such an enormous truth from her cut Elsbeth to the bone.

"You will have your freedom one day soon," Mrs. Banks promised, putting her arm around her as Elsbeth leaned into her shoulder, just as she might have done with her mother. "Just a few more years."

Trying not to cry, Elsbeth buried her face into Mrs. Banks shoulder. "I do not think I can endure any more time here."

"Then be a governess," Mrs. Banks replied, with a small shrug. "Do whatever you wish, whatever you can until you reach twenty-one. And do not marry a gentleman, whatever you do. I know Miss Skelton is hopeful, but I would encourage you to find a way not to attend the ball tomorrow evening or, at the very least, make yourself as inconspicuous as possible."

Caught by a sudden thought, Elsbeth lifted her head. "You will not get yourself into trouble with Miss Skelton over this? I would hate for you to lose your position."

Mrs. Banks smiled softly, patting Elsbeth's cheek. "You are so caring, my dear. And no, so long as you do not reveal it to her then I think all will be well. Besides which, I do not think that Miss Skelton would dare fire me from this position – for who would she find to replace me? Her reputation as a hard woman, with little care or consideration for anyone but herself is well known." She tipped her head, her eyes alive with mirth. "Do you truly think that she would be able to find another worker with any kind of ease?"

Elsbeth had to laugh, despite her confusion and astonishment. "No, I do not think she would."

"Then you need not worry," Mrs. Banks replied, with a broad smile. "Now, off with you. Go and see if there are any letters that need to be posted so that you might take a turn about the London streets. It

might help you think a little more clearly."

"I am rather overwhelmed," Elsbeth admitted, shaking her head. "Thank you for telling me so much, Mrs. Banks. I am indebted to you."

Mrs. Banks smiled again, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. "I shall miss you, when it comes time for you to leave, Elsbeth," she said quietly. "You will promise to write to me, whatever happens?"

Bending down to kiss Mrs. Banks' cheeks, Elsbeth pressed her hands for a moment. "Of course I will, Mrs. Banks. You have made my life so much better here and I will always be grateful for your love and your care for me. Thank you."

Chapter Two

Whilst there were no letters to be sent, there was, according to the housekeeper who did the bidding of Miss Skelton, a need for Elsbeth to adorn the front of the House for Girls with flowers. Apparently, it was a reminder to all the gentlemen who had been invited that the ball was to happen tomorrow evening. Elsbeth did not quite understand given that so many of them had already sent their replies to confirm that, yes, they were to attend tomorrow evening's festivities.

Regardless, Elsbeth did as the housekeeper directed without making even a murmur of protest, thinking that to be outside instead of kept within the House would possibly give her the time she needed to think about all that Mrs. Banks had said. She was in no doubt that Miss Skelton had not said as much to her as regards her dowry and the wonderful age of twenty-one when she would attain her freedom, simply because she did not want Elsbeth to remain in the House for Girls. There had always been something about Elsbeth that Miss Skelton disliked, and now she was making it even more apparent that she did not care for her in the slightest. Whilst Elsbeth knew that she was, as Mrs. Banks had said, a free spirit flying in the face of Miss Skelton's harsh and firmly aligned ways, there had never been any other explanation as to why the lady had taken such a dislike to her. From her earliest memories, Elsbeth could recall Miss Skelton being dismissive and disinterested in her whilst being a *little* more jovial to the other girls. That had only bred anger and resentment in Elsbeth, who had grown more than a little frustrated with the lady's continued dislike of her; so, in her own way, she had done all she could to battle against the lady's hostility, to the point that she knew exactly what to say and do t0 bring her the most frustration.

Perhaps it was a little childish, Elsbeth reflected, as she picked up the basket which held the brightly colored flowers and the string with which she could tie bunches to the railings that surrounded the House for Girls. Then again, she had been a child for a very long time and only in the last few years had begun the journey towards adulthood. Miss Skelton had never changed, and Elsbeth had felt herself shrinking away from her more and more. She often sought the friendship and

understanding of Mrs. Banks, a mother figure to all the orphan girls, and did not think she would have survived life here without her.

But now she had to consider what path to take. She *could* remain here until she was twenty-one, in order to come into her fortune, but that would mean over three years of Miss Skelton's dark looks and embittered words. To continue her quest to become a governess seemed the most likely path to take, for then she could simply give up that life when the time came. What would she do then? Where would she go? It was all so unexpected and yet Elsbeth was filled with a delicious excitement. To finally be free, to finally be able to build her own life….it was so near and yet so very far away.

Walking outside, Elsbeth paused for a moment as she took in the bustling market, the laughter and conversations washing over her like a wave of warmth. It was something she longed for but could never have within the House for Girls. Miss Skelton did not even like them to be near to the market, as though afraid they would smile too much for her liking.

Sighing, Elsbeth turned her back to the busy Smithfield Market and focused on her task, hoping she might be able to linger for a little while after she'd finished her task.

"Are you selling these?"

Jerked from her thoughts, Elsbeth turned to see a young man standing a short distance away from her, his eyes bright and a lazy smile on his face. Schooling her features into one of nothing more than general amiableness, she shook her head.

"No, I'm afraid not, sir. I am to place these around the railings." She did not say why, not wanting to encourage the young man to come to the Smithfield House for the ball, not when he clearly knew this was where she was from.

"I see." He moved closer to her, his smile still lingering – and Elsbeth felt herself shrink back within herself. He was clearly something of a rake, for with his fine cut of clothes and his highly polished boots, there was no doubt that he was a gentleman – and gentlemen, from what she knew, often thought they could get whatever they wished.

He was still watching her intently, his dark brown eyes warm as they lingered on her. His dark hair was swept back, revealing his strong jaw. With his strong back and broad shoulders, Elsbeth was sure that he sent many young ladies hearts beating wildly with hopes of passion, but she had never felt more intimidated.

"Do excuse me," she murmured, making to turn away from him but only for him to catch her elbow.

"Do let me buy one from you," he said, his breath brushing across her cheek. "To remember you by, my fair flower."

Elsbeth felt a curl of fear in her stomach but chose to stand tall, her chin lifted. “No, I thank you, but I cannot sell one to you. I have a job to do. Do excuse me.”

She wrenched her elbow from his hand and turned away again, telling herself to remain strong in the face of his oozing self-importance. She did not like him at all, despite his handsome features, for it was clear that he expected a simple compliment to overwhelm her to the point that she would do just as he wished.

“Well, if you will not sell one to me then perhaps you might converse with me for a time,” the gentleman continued, his smile a little faded from his expression. “I am greatly inclined to know who you are.”

ELSPETH (LOVE THAT OLD-FASHIONED NAME!) doesn’t know what to think of this gentleman. Will he be her future? Check out the full story in the Kindle Store

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